THE OLD WIVES' TALE

Arnold Bennett

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Introduction by Francine Prose

THE MODERN LIBRARY
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ARNOLD BENNETT

Arnold Bennett, a versatile and prolific writer who was one of the luminaries of the London literary scene during the early twentieth century, was born on May 27, 1867. He grew up in the environs of Hanley, Staffordshire, one of the Midlands pottery towns that later served as a backdrop for his celebrated Five Towns novels. The son of a solicitor, Bennett received a secondary education but was forced to leave school at the age of sixteen to clerk in his father's firm. Having twice failed his legal examinations, Bennett escaped to London in 1889 to work in law offices, only to realize that he possessed three qualities that would well serve him as a writer. He listed them: "First an omnivorous and tenacious memory—the kind of memory that remembers how much London spends per day in cab fares just as easily as the order of Shakespeare's plays or the stock anecdotes of Shelley and Byron. Second, a naturally sound taste in literature. And third, the

invaluable, despicable, disingenuous journalistic faculty of seeming to know much more than one does know."

Gradually drawn into literary and artistic circles, Bennett abandoned the law in 1894 and secured an editorial position with the weekly magazine *Woman*. The following year his story "A Letter Home" appeared in the fashionable *Yellow Book,* and he soon brought out an autobiographical first novel, *A Man from the North* (1898). In 1902 Bennett completed two highly popular works: *The Grand Babylon Hotel,* one of his many sensational "fantasias" on modern themes, and *Anna of the Five Towns,* a brilliantly detailed chronicle of life in the Potteries of his boyhood that was inspired by Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*. But the appearance of *The Truth About an Author* (1903), a lighthearted memoir, briefly tarnished his image because it emphasized the commercial aspects of authorship, depicting Bennett as a writer engaged solely in the "manufacture of a dazzling reputation."

In 1903 Bennett resettled in Paris, where he lived for much of the next decade. He continued his examination of provincial mores in countless short stories subsequently collected in *Tales of the Five Towns* (1905), *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* (1907), and *The Matador of the Five Towns and Other Stories* (1912). Bennett scored a triumphant success in 1908 with the publication of *The Old Wives' Tale,* a masterful portrayal of English provincial life that rivals the meticulously crafted novels of Flaubert and other French realists. "It at least doubles your size in my estimation," remarked H. G. Wells. "I am certain it will secure you the respect of all the distinguished critics." And Somerset Maugham later observed: "I was astounded to discover that *The Old Wives' Tale* was a great book. I was thrilled. I was enchanted. I was deeply impressed."

Bennett quickly enhanced his renown with the Clayhanger trilogy, a saga of the Five Towns which comprises *Clayhanger* (1910), *Hilda Lessways* (1911), and *These Twain* (1916). The three novels were reissued in one volume as *The Clayhanger Family* in 1925. He also turned out *Buried Alive* (1908), a satire poking fun at the excesses of modern life; *How to Live on Twenty-four Hours a Day* (1908), the most popular of his several "pocket philosophies"; and *The Card* (1911), the lighthearted tale of a rogue whose every bad deed turns to gold. In addition he enjoyed considerable theatrical success in London with the plays *Milestones* (1912) and *The Great Adventure* (1913).

Bennett's prominence declined temporarily following World War I owing to the appearance of such novels as *The Lion's Share* (1916), *The Pretty Lady* (1918), *The Roll Call* (1918), *Mr. Prohack* (1922), and *Lilian* (1922). Yet he experienced a resurgence of popularity with *Riceyman Steps* (1923), a dark, Dostoyevskian tale praised by Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy, among others, and *Lord Raingo* (1926), an ambitious political novel based on the wartime dealings of his influential friend Lord Beaverbrook. As Bennett himself reflected: "I have written between seventy and eighty books. But I have also written only four: *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Card*, *Clayhanger,* and *Riceyman Steps*." In 1926 he began contributing a weekly book review, "Books and Persons," to the London *Evening Standard*. His final novel, *Imperial Palace,* came out in 1930.

Arnold Bennett died in London of typhoid fever on March 27, 1931. At the time of his death Sinclair Lewis deemed Bennett "one of the really great novelists," and H. L. Mencken reflected: "At his best Bennett was clearly entitled to rank among the half dozen most important English novelists of his time. His two principal works, *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*, are little short of masterpieces." Critic Carl Van Doren concurred: "Arnold Bennett brought into English fiction a range of realism which it had never had before, particularly as concerned with English provincial life. 'The Five Towns' of Arnold Bennett must long remain among the famous territories of the British imagination." *The Journal of Arnold Bennett*, a fascinating account of his life and times, was issued posthumously in three volumes beginning in 1932.

INTRODUCTION

by Francine Prose

The Old Wives' Tale begins in a manner so arresting and bizarre that we may find ourselves wondering why our friends haven't been calling up and insisting that we read it. What makes the first sections so riveting are the tantalizing glimpses of antic, subversive *id* peeking from behind the sturdy superego of the Victorian literary man whose stated ambition was to create a British equivalent of the French realistic novel, of Balzac or Zola. Then the fog of obsession clears, and slowly the novel changes, offering us the pleasure of watching it evolve into something larger and greater even than its creator intended.

If Arnold Bennett's preface dizzies the modern sensibility, it's not so much because of the vertiginous gap between the social behavior he describes and what we intuit would be permissible today, but because of the

more unsettling chasm between the lines of the text—the near-schizophrenic divide between the writer's language and what he claims to be doing.

In 1903, four years before Bennett wrote the novel, he was, he tells us, living in Paris and used to dine at a restaurant where, one evening, the Muse made her appearance, disguised as a repulsive old hag:

> She was fat, shapeless, ugly, and grotesque. She had a ridiculous voice, and ridiculous gestures. It was easy to see that she lived alone, and that in the long lapse of years she had developed the kind of peculiarity which induces guffaws among the thoughtless. She was burdened with a lot of small parcels, which she kept dropping. She chose one seat; and then, not liking it, chose another; and then another. In a few moments she had the whole restaurant laughing at her. . . .
>
> I reflected, concerning the grotesque diner: "The woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. Very probably she is unconscious of her singularities. Her case is a tragedy. One ought to be able to make a heart-rending novel out of the history of a woman such as she." Every stout, ageing woman is not grotesque—far from it!—but there is an extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her form and movements and in her mind. . . .
>
> It was at this instant that I was visited by the idea of writing the book which ultimately became *The Old Wives' Tale*. Of course I felt that the woman who caused the ignoble mirth in the restaurant would not serve me as a type of heroine. For she was much too old and obviously unsympathetic. . . . I knew that I must choose the sort of woman who would pass unnoticed in a crowd.

How rare and fortunate the reader who can finish this passage without flinging down the novel and racing off to her mirror or her bathroom scale! And how difficult to think of another example, in literature, that combines such clinical cruelty with such earnest protestations of sympathy and compassion! What are we to expect from the novel that Bennett is proposing, one that must—we assume—be written from the perspective of the heroine who may not, after all, agree with the writer that the natural effects of age and time are necessarily, in her case, a tragedy, an occasion of extreme pathos?

And what are we to conclude when the novel itself starts out with a statement that will, early on, reveal itself to be either a lie or pure irony or the author's miscalculation? "Those two girls, Constance and Sophia Baines, paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious." Soon enough, it will become painfully clear that the Baines sisters could hardly be *more* conscious of their situation, but for now the narrative has license to leave them to their ignorant bliss and head into a leisurely, Balzacian (think of the opening of *Eugénie Grandet*) description of their region, of the topology of the surrounding countryside, and of the Five Towns, the indispensable manufacturers of pottery for all of England, that form the setting for a number of Bennett's novels. ("You cannot drink tea out of a teacup without the aid of the Five Towns.") Those grim settlements purchased their livelihood by sacrificing natural beauty for "an architecture of ovens and chimneys," an atmosphere "black as its mud"; "for this it burns and smokes all night, so that Longshaw has been compared to hell."

In the heart of this inferno (which our heroines are said not to notice) is the town square, on which the Baines girls' invalid father has a moderately prosperous dry goods shop. Shortly after the novel opens, the teenage girls—"both of them rather like racehorses, quivering with delicate, sensitive, and luxuriant life; exquisite, enchanting proof of the circulation of the blood"—are distracted from their idle entertainments by the groans of a certain Mr. Samuel Povey, their father's loyal assistant, a timid young man afraid of dentists and suffering from a toothache. Obligingly, the sisters produce some laudanum from the medicine chest, and when the patient passes out under its influence, Sophia, the younger and more daring sister, grabs a pair of pliers and pulls Mr. Povey's tooth. He awakes in time for tea—cockles and mussels—and when he suddenly cries out that he's lost his tooth in a mussel, it turns out that Sophia has pulled the wrong tooth. Later that night, when the girls retire to bed, Constance learns that Sophia has saved the extracted tooth. A struggle over the ownership of the molar ensues.

> It was a battle suddenly engaged in the bedroom. The atmosphere had altered completely with the swiftness of magic. The beauty of Sophia, the angelic tenderness of Constance, and the youthful, naïve, innocent charm of both of them, were transformed into something sinister and cruel. . . . They could hear the gas singing over the dressing-table, and their hearts beating the blood wildly in their veins. They ceased to be young without growing old; the eternal had leapt up in them from its sleep.

Eventually Constance steals the tooth and throws it out the window. I will not be giving too much of the plot away when I say that Constance will wind up married to the recovered Mr. Povey, who, as far as we know, never learns that he was the subject of his sister-in-law's experiment in dentistry.

What an intensely peculiar series of events, a scene that could hardly have been written just a few years later when the growing popularity of the ideas of Sigmund Freud would have lent the characters' actions—this rendering of innocent, coltish young girls at war and play—a simultaneously hilarious and pathological

subtext! Readers of later generations may sense the anxiety only partly concealed by Bennett's paean to the power of young women: "The heart of a young girl mysteriously speaks and tells her of her power long ere she can use her power. If she can find nothing else to subdue, you may catch her in the early years subduing a gate-post or drawing homage from an empty chair." And what a fitting beginning to a novel that seems at first like a Chekovian tragicomedy (or a William Trevor story) of blighted small-town hopes and dreams, but one in which many of the characters appear to be suffering from varyingly severe cases of inappropriate affect.

So much, in these early chapters, is tinged with the surreal—particularly the ways in which one event leads to other seemingly logical or inevitable sequences of incidents that could hardly be more peculiar and that continue to resonate as slightly off notes thrumming just beneath the surface of the novel. Thus Sophia's first meeting with Gerald Scales—the roguish, attractive traveling salesman who will change her life forever—takes place in her father's shop, which has been left almost empty because everyone in town (including the Baines family) has gone off to inspect the corpse of the circus elephant recently shot for killing its attendant. (Public executions will figure largely in the novel—the death-by-guillotine that Sophia and Gerald witness in France is perhaps the book's most brilliant and beautifully orchestrated scene—and the ghost of the dead elephant will reappear in the "undescribed soup" that Sophia is served by the proud restaurant owner who has procured the carcasses of zoo animals from the Jardin des Plantes to feed his hungry customers during the Siege of Paris.)

Just a few minutes of harmless flirtation is all it takes for Sophia, entranced by the captivating Mr. Scales, to forget her invalid father, a lapse for which she is swiftly and harshly punished. During those moments, the paralyzed Mr. Baines half slips off his bed and dies, a loss that gives rise to a highly unusual mixture of low comedy and high drama: "His face, neck, and hands were dark and congested; his mouth was open, and the tongue protruded between the black, swollen, mucous lips. . . . After having been unceasingly watched for fourteen years, he had, with an invalid's natural perverseness, taken advantage of Sophia's brief dereliction to expire. Say what you will, amid Sophia's horror, and her terrible grief and shame, she had visitings of the idea: he did it on purpose!"

Guilt subdues the "forbidding, difficult, waspish, and even hedge-hog" Sophia, but not, as it happens, for long. The watchful Mrs. Baines ("for mothers, despite their reputation to the contrary, really are the blindest creatures") fails to notice the signs of Sophia's deepening involvement with Gerald Scales, and eventually Sophia elopes with the commercial traveller, first to London, then Paris. Constance, the more passive sister, remains at home in the Five Towns and marries (happily) Samuel Povey. Together, they run the dry goods shop, making occasional changes and modifications to keep up with fashion and the times—it being understood that time moves slowly in the Five Towns, and fashion arrives only belatedly—and raise their son, the emotionally distant and larcenous Cyril. (Like public execution, hot-air balloon travel, and the violent death of elephants, petty theft and deception are subthemes that recur throughout the book.)

And so the Baines sisters' destinies take off in opposite directions. The novel divides to follow them down their divergent paths, and in the process greatly expands its scope and breadth and depth. Throughout, we continue to feel Bennett's attempts to adhere to the initial idea that swept into that restaurant with that disorderly woman—an effort we may find ourselves wishing he'd abandoned, since the repeated references to ugly old women frequently make the ruinous effects of age and time seem less like a tragedy than like a punishment for some unspecified misdemeanor—"the crime of being over forty, fat, creased, and worn out." Indeed, it's the felony, aggravated by alcoholism, for which one of the novel's minor characters (the wife of Samuel Povey's cousin) must pay the ultimate penalty: she is murdered by her husband. "She was vile. Her scanty yellow-grey hair was dirty, her hollowed neck all grime, her hands abominable, her black dress in decay. She was the dishonour of her sex, her situation, and her years. . . . [Samuel] remembered when, years after their marriage, she was still as pretty, artificial, coquettish, and adamantine in her caprices as a young harlot with a fool at her feet. Time and the slow wrath of God had changed her."

But as so often happens, time and history and the demands of fiction refuse to follow the writer's somewhat more limited plans. As the novel moves forward, the characters of Constance and especially of Sophia grow more multifaceted, complex; they become more compelling to the reader and, we feel, to Bennett; in fact, the *least* interesting thing about them is the unfriendly mischief that age is working on their faces and their bodies. Even as Sophia's marriage founders, and as she rejects the advances of her husband's friend Chirac, we see another sort of romance blooming before our eyes—the sort of literary love affair that occasionally transpires between a writer and a character in a novel, between Tolstoy and Anna Karenina, Flaubert and Emma Bovary, and here, between Arnold Bennett and Sophia Baines.

Tracking Sophia's development from a more or less innocent bride to a competent, self-activated, and independent woman, Bennett keeps enlarging his canvas, broadening his range, as if to accommodate the growing spiritual dimensions of its central figure. The novel's extraordinary set pieces—the execution in Auxerre, the Siege of Paris and the Paris Commune, Chirac's ill-fated attempt to escape Paris in a balloon—are fascinating not only in themselves but because Sophia is experiencing them and learning, perpetually learning. Before we quite know it, the novel has changed from a portrait of the pettinesses and discontents of small-town existence into an astonishing bildungs-roman charting the education of a modern woman.

Everything is a revelation to Sophia, who intercedes between us and the more disorienting aspects of a

foreign culture, the "casualness" and "extraordinary lightness" with which Gerald and his French acquaintances arrange their affairs, the coarse bloody-mindedness of the capital punishment buffs who have made a pilgrimage (along with Sophia and Gerald and Chirac) to see the prisoner guillotined at Auxerre, and who are staying at a hotel on the square where the event is to occur:

> Some of the people there made a practice of attending every execution. . . . There was a woman who could recall the dying words of all the victims of justice for twenty years past. The table roared with hysteric laughter at one of the woman's anecdotes. . . . How a criminal had said to the priest who was good-naturedly trying to screen the sight of the guillotine from him with his body: "Stand away now, parson. Haven't I paid to see it?"

Even this becomes part of Sophia's education, so that as she observes the execution from her hotel window (from which she has just seen the faithless Gerald emerging from a house with a woman) she watches the priest inserting himself between the guillotine and its about-to-be victim.

Meanwhile, what *we* are watching is a woman receiving a fairly stiff and radical dose of reality, a series of progressively more intense shocks that awaken her to what is required if she intends to survive. Unlike her larcenous nephew Cyril, who filches money from the till in his family's shop, Sophia—deciding to steal from Gerald—is (as the rest of the novel confirms) achieving a moral triumph that will save her own life:

> She had no silly, delicate notions about stealing. She obscurely felt that, in the care of a man like Gerald, she might find herself in the most monstrous, the most impossible dilemmas. Those notes, safe and secret in her skirt, gave her confidence, reassured her against the perils of the future, and endowed her with independence. The act was characteristic of her enterprise and her fundamental prudence. It approached the heroic.

Sophia suffers and learns, survives and prevails, and as Bennett grows more and more taken with her, his novel comes to know her better and better. Following the delicately nuanced turns of her relationship with Chirac, we begin to agree that *The Old Wives' Tale* is, as its fans have claimed, a powerful and convincing novel written by a man, from the point of view of a woman. Its creator is no longer the solitary restaurant patron whose meal is being disrupted by a grotesque old woman, but rather, a writer fully capable of imagining how a woman like Sophia might see the world, and might want to be seen. So much is unexpected and unpredictable, even the effects of age, so that twice in the novel (once near the middle, once near the end) Bennett gives us the same description of Sophia, with only slight variations, a portrait that could hardly be less like that of the old woman in the preface:

> Sophia was such a woman as, by a mere glance as she utters an opinion, will make a man say to himself, half in desire and half in alarm lest she reads him too: "By Jove! she must have been through a thing or two. She knows what people are!"
> He was pleased by the quick responsiveness of her temperament, and the masterful vigour which occasionally flashed out in her replies. He noticed the hardly perceptible distortion of her handsome, worn face, and he said to himself. "She's been through a thing or two."

As the novel draws toward its conclusion, and the sisters are reunited, Bennett seems to have learned, and to be able to tell us, an enormous amount about the ways in which women behave with one another, the delicate compromises and dispositions of weakness and strength, power and compliance.

Reading the *The Old Wives' Tale* provides the extraordinary experience of watching a novel grow and deepen along with its heroines. Planned as a taxonomic study of female physical disintegration, Bennett's book becomes an account of a woman's psychological and spiritual triumph. Having wanted to report to his readers on what society was like and how it changed in the decades before the novel was written, Arnold Bennett managed to tell us something of what *would* happen in the world, how human behavior *would* change, decades and decades after his remarkable book appeared.

FRANCINE PROSE is the author of nine novels, including *Hunters and Gatherers*, *Bigfoot Dreams*, and *Primitive People*, two story collections, and most recently a collection of novellas, *Guided Tours of Hell*. Her stories and essays have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Observer*, and numerous other publications. A fellow of the New York Institute for the Humanities, and of the New York Public Library's Center for Scholars and Writers, she writes regularly on art for *The Wall Street Journal*. The winner of Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships, two NEA grants, and a PEN translation prize, she has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the University of Arizona, the University of Utah, and the Bread Loaf and Sewanee Writers' Conferences. A film based on her novel *Household Saints* was released in 1993.

COMMENTARY

by

REBECCA WEST

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

VIRGINIA WOOLF

H. G. WELLS

HENRY JAMES

J. B. PRIESTLEY

REBECCA WEST

Arnold Bennett was indubitably great. I do not mean that he was a great writer, for about that, owing to the peculiar circumstances of his literary career, it is not easy to be sure. But as a character in a novel written by a great writer at his best was great, so was Arnold Bennett. He could not be compared properly with Fielding, or Dickens, or Balzac, but he could be compared with Squire Western, or Mr. Micawber, or Lucien de Rubempré. He was positive as they were, positive as the creations of mere nature rarely are.

Arnold Bennett wanted to do everything and to be everything. That determined his personal life and his literary career; and in that latter sphere it led to the curious result that he succeeded in being nearly everybody in turn. Incredible as it may seem, he successively occupied the positions in English literature which are roughly comparable to those in America occupied by—at their zenith—S. S. Van Dine, Sinclair Lewis, James Huneker, Theodore Dreiser and William Lyon Phelps. These analogues are not exact. The parallel between Arnold Bennett and Sinclair Lewis lies in nothing profound, but simply in the fact that both turned back from the metropolis and set themselves to a patient evaluation of provincial life, and gained great applause thereby. But the range of names does suggest the astonishing diversity of eminences between which he journeyed in his life-time. It is not less astonishing that in the spaces between his enjoyment of these eminences he was not eminent at all. He was as unequal as Wordsworth—a writer whom he resembled more closely than the hasty might suspect.

He had the first necessity for a novelist in his insatiable appetite for life. He loved every phenomenon which the world presented to him and grudged no expense of time and energy in studying it. Also he had the right emotional dynamo: what he saw he loved. The phenomena which the world was presenting to him at the moment when he began writing were those which composed life in the Five Towns: the amalgam of always patient and occasionally heroic and occasionally contemptibly supine endurance of routine and tedium, of staunchness and obstinacy, of preference for the uncolored stuff that lasts over the colored stuff which wears into holes, which is characteristic of English provincial life. He looked on this and saw that it was good. He saw, too, and here he was in advance of his age, that its physical setting was good: that the plumes of flame with which the factories brush the night sky, that snowdrops pushing their naive whiteness through the oily blackness of a sooty garden in front of a little house in a row, that the lights and shadows in a mean little room are as gloriously beautiful to the artist's eye as the Parthenon against a blue sky.

This was nearly a revelation at this time. There are many reasons why Shaw and Wells and Galsworthy and Bennett should be honored; but chief among them is the difference between the state of English literature when they started to write and its state today. The English novel of the '90s was deplorably frivolous. The outstanding personality in English fiction since the passing of Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope and George Eliot was Robert Louis Stevenson; and it was his personal tragedy that he was under the thrall of an imaginary commitment to the graceful and discreet and limited.

The age was hungry for more solid food. Thomas Hardy, discouraged by the outcry over *Jude,* had shut up shop as a novelist. George Moore was working away, but he was so great that there was always bound to be a slight uneasiness between him and his generation. His way was not theirs; he was teaching them a new way. They were bound to feel a certain shyness, suspicion, resentment, envy. Henry James was doing superb work, but all the same he was (being essentially timid) subscribing to the heresy of the age and was not honestly with those who wanted sounder doctrine. The so-called esthetic movement of the '90s had promised much,

but it had vanished, partly on account of trouble with the police, but largely because it knew too little about esthetics. Its literature was noisy but empty of content like a drum. It was no wonder that the one writer who insisted on being earnest, George Gissing, received a homage from the young which is well nigh incredible in view of the drab incompetence of his writing. The situation was deplorable.

Then there came Shaw, Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett. And Bennett's was in a sense the most easing advent. The other three came to give good writing which, however, they entangled in the nexus of modern and anti-capitalist thought. But Bennett stood for a purer liberation. He stood for the emancipation of the phenomenon, for the establishment of democracy among the perceptions. A novel need not depict nice people, it need not inculcate an established system of morality, it need not be loyal to any standard of delicacy. Simply it must celebrate life. He piled up book after book of sober, unevasive studies of provincial existence, till the world took notice and saw that a barrier had been built up between it and the floods of romanticism that had threatened to wash it away. True that at first he had to attract their attention by writing thrillers of a new kind, as glossily efficient and abounding in gadgets as a modern bathroom. It is not sufficiently remembered that he invented the modern type of detective story that is half an adventure story. The business had been begun by Conan Doyle, who showed one Sherlock Holmes and Watson peering down on the tobacco ash;but not till *The Grand Babylon Hotel* did one have a detective story that showed the crime being committed, that gave the rapture of the flight as well as the chase. As always, Arnold Bennett had to have everything.

He wrote better and better. *Whom God Hath Joined* is possibly still the best novel ever written about divorce; there is a scene beside a canal, a prehensile woman being detached, which is a masterpiece. *Leonora* is a beautiful study of maturity. In their day both were not only good but daring. One did not write about divorce, for it was too full of sensuous possibilities; and for the opposite reason one did not write about a woman of forty. Financial ease came to him and he went to live in France, and in that country, where traditions grow thick-trunked and deep-rooted like old oaks, he found the reinforcement of the spirit that many find there. Then he traveled on to the point where he wrote *The Old Wives' Tale*.

That was his highest point. It is high enough to establish in itself his claim to greatness. It is certain that his work will puzzle posterity, for the reason that in the years after the production of his masterpiece he applied no standard to his artistry save the single test of quantity. He was utterly without power of self-criticism, and he would issue his worst in the confident illusion that it was simply different in kind from his best. It is quite possible that by the end of his life his grossly and obviously bad books outnumbered his good; and scholarly posterity by the time it has waded through half a dozen *Lillians* and *Pretty Ladies* will have had a pretty tough time. But when they come on *The Old Wives' Tale* they will know why we count him a king among writers.

I have said that there was a certain resemblance between Wordsworth and Arnold Bennett; and here it is most manifest. For it is a lifting from the earth of the web of false values which gentility and romanticism have thrown over it, and a recognition of the true colors of the things that grow upon it. Knights pricking o'er the plain are tragic and glorious; but so too are linendrapers in Bursley. Maidens tied to trees by wicked kings touch the heart; but so too do two Five Town wenches named Constance and Sophia. There is now no longer any need to stress this point, any more than there is to stress Wordsworth's case for the abolition of the specialized poetic vocabulary. But the desire to prove this point when that was necessary wrought up both these men to a pitch of excitement that enabled them to extend their power to as near the human limits as their generation could. Arnold Bennett used his power of empathy to enter into each of his characters in turn, to imagine how each of them would have reacted to all of their experiences. He analyzed each moment that was thus presented him till he squeezed the last drop of significance from it, he synthesized the results of his analysis with his dogged determination to get the right relationship between his thought and the reader's attention, so that once read it is retained. It has the peculiar strength of something that is cut back to the primitive roots of being. The degree to which these people are civilized means merely that they have stepped out of the chiaroscuro of the jungle into a clear light where it can be seen more plainly what birth and love and death meant to them. And at the same time, as "Jacob Tonson" in the London weekly, *The New Age*, he indorsed with his criticism all the other writers of his time who claimed the same right to range with daring and seriousness through the whole of life. He inspired a whole generation of writers just as Huneker did in America.

He came near to reaching that standard again in *Riceyman Steps;* but not, I think, in the Clayhanger trilogy. His novels declined in quality for a variety of reasons, most of which were paradoxically rooted in his virtues. For one thing, the ambition to know everything defeated itself. I only came to know him during the last sixteen years of his life, and he then struck me as being at once one of the most observant and unobservant persons I have ever known. He would remember the order of the shops in an unimportant street in a foreign city for years; but he was curiously blind about human beings. He would know a man and a woman for years and see them constantly without realizing that they were engaged in a tragical love affair; he could meet a man shaken by a recent bereavement and notice nothing unusual about him till he was told. I am told that this was amazingly unlike him in his youth and indeed all the earlier books bear proof of an extremely penetrating vision regarding his fellow creatures. The plain fact was, I suppose, that there is a limit to the powers of human attention and memory, and that he had touched it.

From *Arnold Bennett Himself*, 1931

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

I was astounded to discover that [Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*] was a great book. I was thrilled. I was enchanted. I was deeply impressed, I had never suspected that Arnold was capable of writing anything of the sort. It would be impertinent of me to say anything in praise of it. I have read many appreciations of it, and I think everything has been said but one thing, and that is that it is eminently readable. I should not mention a merit that is so obvious except that many great books do not possess it. It is the greatest gift of the story-teller, and one that Arnold Bennett had even in his slightest and most trivial pieces. I thought at first that he owed it to his journalistic training, but . . . now I am under the impression that it is due to the intense interest the author has in what he is writing at the moment.

[Bennett] was neither mystic nor poet. He was interested in material things and in the passions common to all men. He described life, as every writer does, in the terms of his own temperament. He was more concerned with the man in the street than with the exceptional person.

The Old Wives' Tale is certainly the best book he wrote. He never lost the desire to write another as good, and because it was written by an effort of will he thought he could repeat it. He tried in *Clayhanger*, and for a time it looked as though he might succeed. I think he failed only because his material fizzled out. After *The Old Wives' Tale* he had not enough left to complete the vast structure he had designed.

From *Life and Letters*, 1931

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do. No single phrase will sum up the charge or grievance which we have to bring against a mass of work so large in its volume and embodying so many qualities, both admirable and the reverse. If we tried to formulate our meaning in one word we should say that these three writers are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only in the desert, the better for its soul. Naturally, no single word reaches the centre of three separate targets. In the case of Mr. Wells it falls notably wide of the mark. And yet even with him it indicates to our thinking the fatal alloy in his genius, the great clod of clay that has got itself mixed up with the purity of his inspiration. But Mr. Bennett is perhaps the worst culprit of the three, inasmuch as he is by far the best workman. He can make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in. There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet—if life should refuse to live there? That is a risk which the creator of *The Old Wives' Tale*, George Cannon, Edwin Clayhanger, and hosts of other figures, may well claim to have surmounted. His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for? More and more they seem to us, deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns, to spend their time in some softly padded first-class railway carriage, pressing bells and buttons innumerable; and the destiny to which they travel so luxuriously becomes more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton. . . .

We have to admit that we are exacting, and, further, that we find it difficult to justify our discontent by explaining what it is that we exact. We frame our question differently at different times. But it reappears most persistently as we drop the finished novel on the crest of a sigh—Is it worth while? What is the point of it all? Can it be that owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time Mr. Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this, but we scarcely better the matter by speaking, as critics are prone to do, of reality. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us

at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.

From “Modern Fiction,” in *The Common Reader*, 1948

H. G. WELLS

[While the current English spirit in novel-writing] is toward discursiveness and variety, the new French movement is rather toward exhaustiveness. One who is, I think, quite the greatest of our contemporary English novelists, Mr. Bennett, has experimented in both forms of amplitude. His superb *Old Wives’ Tale*, wandering from person to person and from scene to scene, is by far the finest ‘long novel’ that has been written in English in the English fashion, in this generation; and now in *Clayhanger* and its promised collaterals he undertakes that complete, minute, abundant presentation of the growth and modification of one or two individual minds, which is the essential characteristic of the continental movement toward the novel of amplitude. While the *Old Wives’ Tale* is discursive, *Clayhanger* is exhaustive; he gives us both types of the new movement in perfection.

From “The Contemporary Novel,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1912

HENRY JAMES

The Old Wives’ Tale is the history of two sisters, daughters of a prosperous draper in a Staffordshire town, who, separating early in life, through the flight of one of them to Paris with an ill-chosen husband and the confirmed and prolonged local pitch of the career of the other, are reunited late in life by the return of the fugitive after much Parisian experience and by her pacified acceptance of the conditions of her birthplace. The divided current flows together again, and the chronicle closes with the simple drying up determined by the death of the sisters. That is all; the canvas is covered, ever so closely and vividly covered, by the exhibition of innumerable small facts and aspects, at which we assist with the most comfortable sense of their substantial truth. The sisters, and more particularly the less adventurous, are at home in their author’s mind, they sit and move at their ease in the square chamber of his attention, to a degree beyond which the production of that ideal harmony between creature and creator could scarcely go, and all by an art of demonstration so familiar and so “quiet” that the truth and the poetry, to use Goethe’s distinction, melt utterly together and we see no difference between the subject of the show and the showman’s feeling, let alone the showman’s manner, about it. This felt identity of the elements—because we at least consciously feel—becomes in the novel we refer to, and not less in *Clayhanger*, which our words equally describe, a source for us of abject confidence, confidence truly *so* abject in the solidity of every appearance that it may be said to represent our whole relation to the work and completely to exhaust our reaction upon it. *Clayhanger*, of the two fictions even the more densely loaded with all the evidence in what we should call the case presented did we but learn meanwhile for that case, or for a case of what, to take it, inscribes the annals, the private more particularly, of a provincial printer in a considerable way of business, beginning with his early boyhood and going on to the complications of his maturity—these not exhausted with our present possession of the record, inasmuch as by the author’s announcement there is more of the catalogue to come. This most monumental of Mr. Arnold Bennett’s recitals, taking it with its supplement of *Hilda Lessways*, already before us, is so describable through its being a monument exactly not to an idea, a pursued and captured meaning, or in short *to* anything whatever, but just simply *of* the quarried and gathered material it happens to contain, the stones and bricks and rubble and cement and promiscuous constituents of every sort that have been heaped in it and thanks to which it quite massively piles itself up. Our perusal and our enjoyment are our watching of the growth of the pile and of the capacity, industry, energy with which the operation is directed. A huge and in its way a varied aggregation, without traceable lines, divinable direction, effect of composition, the mere number of its pieces, the great dump of its material, together with the fact that here and there in the miscellany, as with the value of bits of marble or porphyry, fine elements shine out, it keeps us standing and waiting to the end—and largely just because it keeps us wondering. We surely wonder more what it may all propose to mean than any equal appearance of preparation to relieve us of that strain, any so founded and grounded a postponement of the

disclosure of a sense in store, has for a long time called upon us to do in a like connection. A great thing it is assuredly that *while* we wait and wonder we are amused—were it not for that, truly, our situation would be thankless enough; we may ask ourselves, as has already been noted, why on such ambiguous terms we should consent to be, and why the practice doesn't at a given moment break down; and our answer brings us back to that many-fingered grasp of the orange that the author squeezes. This particular orange is of the largest and most rotund, and his trust in the consequent flow is of its nature communicative. Such is the case always, and most naturally, with that air in a person who has something, who at the very least has much to tell us: we *like* so to be affected by it, we meet it half way and lend ourselves, sinking in up to the chin. Up to the chin only indeed, beyond doubt; we even then feel our head emerge, for judgment and articulate question, and it is from that position that we remind ourselves how the real reward of our patience is still to come—the reward attending not at all the immediate sense of immersion, but reserved for the after-sense, which is a very different matter, whether in the form of a glow or of a chill.

From "The New Novel," in *Notes on Novelists*, *with Some Other Notes,* 1914

J. B. PRIESTLEY

It would be difficult to overpraise the skill with which [*The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*] have been devised and executed. . . . [Despite] their drab setting, their deliberate insistence upon prosaic matters, and their uneasy skepticism, which makes their author appear an ironical spectator of this life—despite all these things, they are really the work of a thorough romantic. Bennett is an English romantic working in an alien method, a method that suggests anything rather than the romantic outlook and temper. . . . He hustles away all the usual romantic trappings, the tinsel and the limelight and the sobbing violins, brings before us the most commonplace people in the dingiest and dreariest setting it is possible to imagine, and then proceeds to evolve romance. There is always present in his mind, and if it is not in the reader's too then the whole significance of these fictions has been missed, the piquant contrast between what we might call the "outward" and the "inward" views of his creatures' lives. . . . [Unless] the reader keeps this contrast in mind, the romantic significance of these stories is lost. Modern life is peculiarly suitable for this method of treatment because, with all its bewildering and intricate organization, it presents to us a mass of fellow-creatures who are not, so to speak, realized as fellow-creatures at all except at odd moments; we see them as economic units and what not, and their real humanity is lost. . . . Because we see them in terms of tags and labels, we are apt to forget that their lives to them are as exciting and wonderful as are our lives to us. In earlier times, the common brotherhood of men was ever present in men's minds—a universal religion never allowed them to forget the fact; but in our great modern cities we need to be ever reminded, and it says a good deal for Arnold Bennett that . . . he has revealed and stressed this common humanity. So far, so good. And yet something is wrong. . . . It is not enough that he should run a kind of romantic obstacle race; he should give us a personal vision of this world. The same fault we remarked in his lighter work is present in a slightly different form here too; he is too general, too easily satisfied with a broad average; he does not dig deep enough. We feel a want in him of values, a certain insensitiveness to the finer shades of feeling, the more subtle traits of character, the more poetical and mystical states of mind. He lacks the philosophic imagination that is necessary to all works of art on a great scale. He takes his old woman in the provinces, his dead miser in Clerkenwell, and, running back over their lives, contrives to tell us more of the truth about them than all the newspaper reports or the works of the social historian; but, we feel, he does not tell us the whole truth about them, not because he does not wish to but simply because he cannot. . . . [He] is a great journalist, who has an unflagging zest for and curiosity about the surfaces of this life; but while he has the virtues, the very solid virtues, of the great journalist, he has also the serious limitations. Whole sides of life and states of mind, and these not the least important, some of them perhaps the most important, seem to mean nothing to him; he can humanize the world of the newspapers, but cannot even enter the world of the poets and the saints and the philosophers. It is only right that he should have become one of the most successful men of letters of his time, if only because he is very much a creature of his time who has exploited, with extraordinary skill, the modern world as perhaps no other novelist, with the possible exception of Mr. Wells, has exploited it. An ordinary man of talent could not have done it; a great man of genius would have done something more.

From "Modern English Novelists: Arnold Bennett," in *English Journal*, 1925

To W.W.K.

PREFACE

In the autumn of 1903 I used to dine frequently in a restaurant in the Rue de Clichy, Paris. Here were, among others, two waitresses that attracted my attention. One was a beautiful, pale young girl, to whom I never spoke, for she was employed far away from the table which I affected. The other, a stout, middle-aged managing Breton woman, had sole command over my table and me, and gradually she began to assume such a maternal tone towards me that I saw I should be compelled to leave that restaurant. If I was absent for a couple of nights running she would reproach me sharply: "What! you are unfaithful to me?" Once, when I complained about some French beans, she informed me roundly that French beans were a subject which I did not understand. I then decided to be eternally unfaithful to her, and I abandoned the restaurant. A few nights before the final parting an old woman came into the restaurant to dine. She was fat, shapeless, ugly, and grotesque. She had a ridiculous voice, and ridiculous gestures. It was easy to see that she lived alone, and that in the long lapse of years she had developed the kind of peculiarity which induces guffaws among the thoughtless. She was burdened with a lot of small parcels, which she kept dropping. She chose one seat; and then, not liking it, chose another; and then another. In a few moments she had the whole restaurant laughing at her. That my middle-aged Breton should laugh was indifferent to me, but I was pained to see a coarse grimace of giggling on the pale face of the beautiful young waitress to whom I had never spoken.

I reflected, concerning the grotesque diner: "The woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. Very probably she is unconscious of her singularities. Her case is a tragedy. One ought to be able to make a heart-rending novel out of the history of a woman such as she." Every stout, ageing woman is not grotesque—far from it!—but there is an extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her form and movements and in her mind. And the fact that the change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos.

It was at this instant that I was visited by the idea of writing the book which ultimately became *The Old Wives' Tale*. Of course I felt that the woman who caused the ignoble mirth in the restaurant would not serve me as a type of heroine. For she was much too old and obviously unsympathetic. It is an absolute rule that the principal character of a novel must not be unsympathetic, and the whole modern tendency of realistic fiction is against oddness in a prominent figure. I knew that I must choose the sort of woman who would pass unnoticed in a crowd.

I put the idea aside for a long time, but it was never very distant from me. For several reasons it made a special appeal to me. I had always been a convinced admirer of Mrs W. K. Clifford's most precious novel, *Aunt Anne*, but I wanted to see in the story of an old woman many things that Mrs W. K. Clifford had omitted from *Aunt Anne*. Moreover, I had always revolted against the absurd youthfulness, the unfading youthfulness of the average heroine. And as a protest against this fashion, I was already, in 1903, planning a novel *(Leonora)* of which the heroine was aged forty, and had daughters old enough to be in love. The reviewers, by the way, were staggered by my hardihood in offering a woman of forty as a subject of serious interest to the public. But I meant to go much farther than forty! Finally, as a supreme reason, I had the example and the challenge of Guy de Maupassant's *Une Vie*. In the nineties we used to regard *Une Vie* with mute awe, as being the summit of achievement in fiction. And I remember being very cross with Mr Bernard Shaw because, having read *Une Vie* at the suggestion (I think) of Mr William Archer, he failed to see in it anything very remarkable. Here I must confess that, in 1908, I read *Une Vie* again, and in spite of a natural anxiety to differ from Mr Bernard

Shaw, I was gravely disappointed with it. It is a fine novel, but decidedly inferior to *Pierre et Jean* or even *Fort Comme la Mort*. To return to the year 1903. *Une Vie* relates the entire life-history of a woman. I settled in the privacy of my own head that my book about the development of a young girl into a stout old lady must be the English *Une Vie*. I have been accused of every fault except a lack of self-confidence, and in a few weeks I settled a further point, namely, that my book must 'go one better' than *Une Vie,* and that to this end it must be the life-history of two women instead of only one. Hence, *The Old Wives' Tale* has two heroines. Constance was the original; Sophia was created out of bravado, just to indicate that I declined to consider Guy de Maupassant as the last forerunner of the deluge. I was intimidated by the audacity of my project, but I had sworn to carry it out. For several years I looked it squarely in the face at intervals, and then walked away to write novels of smaller scope, of which I produced five or six. But I could not dally for ever, and in the autumn of 1907 I actually began to write it, in a village near Fontainebleau, where I rented half a house from a retired railway servant. I calculated that it would be 200,000 words long (which it exactly proved to be), and I had a vague notion that no novel of such dimensions (except Richardson's) had ever been written before. So I counted the words in several famous Victorian novels, and discovered to my relief that the famous Victorian novels average 400,000 words apiece. I wrote the first part of the novel in six weeks. It was fairly easy to me, because, in the seventies, in the first decade of my life, I had lived in the actual draper's shop of the Baineses, and knew it as only a child could know it. Then I went to London on a visit. I tried to continue the book in a London hotel, but London was too distracting, and I put the thing away, and during January and February of 1908, I wrote *Buried Alive,* which was published immediately, and was received with majestic indifference by the English public, an indifference which has persisted to this day.

I then returned to the Fontainebleau region and gave *The Old Wives' Tale* no rest till I finished it at the end of July 1908. It was published in the autumn of the same year, and for six weeks afterward the English public steadily confirmed an opinion expressed by a certain person in whose judgement I had confidence, to the effect that the work was honest but dull, and that when it was not dull it had a regrettable tendency to facetiousness. My publishers, though brave fellows, were somewhat disheartened; however, the reception of the book gradually became less and less frigid.

With regard to the French portion of the story, it was not until I had written the first part that I saw from a study of my chronological basis that the Siege of Paris might be brought into the tale. The idea was seductive; but I hated, and still hate, the awful business of research; and I only knew the Paris of the Twentieth Century. Now I was aware that my railway servant and his wife had been living in Paris at the time of the war. I said to the old man, "By the way, you went through the Siege of Paris, didn't you?" He turned to his old wife and said, uncertainly, "The Siege of Paris? Yes, we did, didn't we?" The Siege of Paris had been only one incident among many in their lives. Of course, they remembered it well, though not vividly, and I gained much information from them. But the most useful thing which I gained from them was the perception, startling at first, that ordinary people went on living very ordinary lives in Paris during the siege, and that to the vast mass of the population the siege was not the dramatic, spectacular, thrilling, ecstatic affair that is described in history. Encouraged by this perception, I decided to include the siege in my scheme. I read Sarcey's diary of the siege aloud to my wife, and I looked at the pictures in Jules Claretie's popular work on the siege and the commune, and I glanced at the printed collection of official documents, and there my research ended.

It has been asserted that unless I had actually been present at a public execution, I could not have written the chapter in which Sophia was at the Auxerre solemnity. I have not been present at a public execution, as the whole of my information about public executions was derived from a series of articles on them which I read in the Paris *Matin*. Mr Frank Harris, discussing my book in *Vanity Fair,* said it was clear that I had not seen an execution (or words to that effect), and he proceeded to give his own description of an execution. It was a brief but terribly convincing bit of writing, quite characteristic and quite worthy of the author of *Montes the Matador* and of a man who has been almost everywhere and seen almost everything. I comprehended how far short I had fallen of the truth! I wrote to Mr Frank Harris, regretting that his description had not been printed before I wrote mine, as I should assuredly have utilized it, and, of course, I admitted that I had never witnessed an execution. He simply replied: "Neither have I." This detail is worth preserving, for it is a reproof to that large body of readers, who, when a novelist has really carried conviction to them, assert off hand: "Oh, that must be autobiography!"

Arnold Bennett

BOOK ONE

MRS BAINES

CHAPTER I

THE SQUARE

I

Those two girls, Constance and Sophia Baines, paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious. They were, for example, established almost precisely on the fifty-third parallel of latitude. A little way to the north of them, in the creases of a hill famous for its religious orgies, rose the river Trent, the calm and characteristic stream of middle England. Somewhat farther northwards, in the near neighbourhood of the highest public-house in the realm, rose two lesser rivers, the Dane and the Dove, which, quarrelling in early infancy, turned their back on each other, and, the one by favour of the Weaver and the other by favour of the Trent, watered between them the whole width of England, and poured themselves respectively into the Irish Sea and the German Ocean. What a county of modest, unnoticed rivers! What a natural, simple county, content to fix its boundaries by these tortuous island brooks, with their comfortable names—Trent, Mease, Dove, Tern, Dane, Mees, Stour, Tame, and even hasty Severn! Not that the Severn is suitable to the county! In the county excess is deprecated. The county is happy in not exciting remark. It is content that Shropshire should possess that swollen bump, the Wrekin, and that the exaggerated wildness of the Peak should lie over its border. It does not desire to be a pancake, like Cheshire. It has everything that England has, including thirty miles of Watling Street; and England can show nothing more beautiful and nothing uglier than the works of nature and the works of man to be seen within the limits of the county. It is England in little, lost in the midst of England, unsung by searchers after the extreme; perhaps occasionally somewhat sore at this neglect, but how proud in the instinctive cognizance of its representative features and traits!

Constance and Sophia, busy with the intense preoccupations of youth, recked not of such matters. They were surrounded by the county. On every side the fields and moors of Staffordshire, intersected by roads and lanes, railways, watercourses and telegraph-lines, patterned by hedges, ornamented and made respectable by halls and genteel parks, enlivened by villages at the intersections, and warmly surveyed by the sun, spread out undulating. And trains were rushing round curves in deep cuttings, and carts and waggons trotting and jingling on the yellow roads, and long, narrow boats passing in a leisure majestic and infinite over the surface of the stolid canals; the rivers had only themselves to support, for Staffordshire rivers have remained virgin of keels to this day. One could imagine the messages concerning prices, sudden death, and horses, in their flight through the wires under the feet of birds. In the inns Utopians were shouting the universe into order over beer, and in the halls and parks the dignity of England was being preserved in a fitting manner. The villages were full of women who did nothing but fight against dirt and hunger, and repair the effects of friction on clothes. Thousands of labourers were in the fields, but the fields were so broad and numerous that this scattered multitude was totally lost therein. The cuckoo was much more perceptible than man, dominating whole square miles with his resounding call. And on the airy moors heath-larks played in the ineffaceable muletracks that had served centuries before even the Romans thought of Watling Street. In short, the usual daily life of the county was proceeding with all its immense variety and importance; but though Constance and Sophia were in it they were not of it.

The fact is, that while in the county they were also in the district; and no person who lives in the district, even if he should be old and have nothing to do but reflect upon things in general, ever thinks about the county. So far as the county goes, the district might almost as well be in the middle of the Sahara. It ignores the county, save that it uses it nonchalantly sometimes as leg-stretcher on holiday afternoons, as a man may use his back garden. It has nothing in common with the county; it is richly sufficient to itself. Nevertheless, its self-sufficiency and the true salt savour of its life can only be appreciated by picturing it hemmed in by county. It lies on the face of the county like an insignificant stain, like a dark Pleiades in a green and empty sky. And Hanbridge has the shape of a horse and its rider, Bursley of half a donkey, Knype of a pair of trousers, Longshaw of an octopus, and little Turnhill of a beetle. The Five Towns seem to cling together for safety. Yet the idea of clinging together for safety would make them laugh. They are unique and indispensable. From the north of the county right down to the south they alone stand for civilization, applied science, organized manufacture, and the century—until you come to Wolverhampton. They are unique and indispensable because you cannot drink tea out of a teacup without the aid of the Five Towns; because you cannot eat a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns. For this the architecture of the Five Towns is

an architecture of ovens and chimneys; for this its atmosphere is as black as its mud; for this it burns and smokes all night, so that Longshaw has been compared to hell; for this it is unlearned in the ways of agriculture, never having seen corn except as packing straw and in quartern loaves; for this, on the other hand, it comprehends the mysterious habits of fire and pure, sterile earth; for this it lives crammed together in slippery streets where the housewife must change white window-curtains at least once a fortnight if she wishes to remain respectable; for this it gets up in the mass at six A.M., winter and summer, and goes to bed when the public-houses close; for this it exists—that you may drink tea out of a teacup and toy with a chop on a plate. All the everyday crockery used in the kingdom is made in the Five Towns—all, and much besides. A district capable of such gigantic manufacture, of such a perfect monopoly—and which finds energy also to produce coal and iron and great men—may be an insignificant stain on a county, considered geographically, but it is surely well justified in treating the county as its back garden once a week, and in blindly ignoring it the rest of the time.

Even the majestic thought that whenever and wherever in all England a woman washes up, she washes up the product of the district; that whenever and wherever in all England a plate is broken the fracture means new business for the district—even this majestic thought had probably never occurred to either of the girls. The fact is, that while in the Five Towns they were also in the Square. Bursley and the Square ignored the staple manufacture as perfectly as the district ignored the county. Bursley has the honours of antiquity in the Five Towns. No industrial development can ever rob it of its superiority in age, which makes it absolutely sure in its conceit. And the time will never come when the other towns—let them swell and bluster as they may—will not pronounce the name of Bursley as one pronounces the name of one's mother. Add to this that the Square was the centre of Bursley's retail trade (which scorned the staple as something wholesale, vulgar, and assuredly filthy), and you will comprehend the importance and the self-isolation of the Square in the scheme of the created universe. There you have it, embedded in the district, and the district embedded in the county, and the county lost and dreaming in the heart of England!

The Square was named after St Luke. The Evangelist might have been startled by certain phenomena in his square, but, except in Wakes Week, when the shocking always happened, St Luke's Square lived in a manner passably saintly—though it contained five public-houses. It contained five public-houses, a bank, a barber's, a confectioner's, three grocers', two chemists', an ironmonger's, a clothier's, and five drapers'. These were all the catalogue. St Luke's Square had no room for minor establishments. The aristocracy of the Square undoubtedly consisted of the drapers (for the bank was impersonal); and among the five the shop of Baines stood supreme. No business establishment could possibly be more respected than that of Mr Baines was respected. And though John Baines had been bedridden for a dozen years, he still lived on the lips of admiring, ceremonious burgesses as "our honoured fellow-townsman." He deserved his reputation.

The Baineses' shop, to make which three dwellings had at intervals been thrown into one, lay at the bottom of the Square. It formed about one-third of the south side of the Square, the remainder being made up of Critchlow's (chemist), the clothier's, and the Hanover Spirit Vaults. ("Vaults" was a favourite synonym of the public-house in the Square. Only two of the public-houses were crude public-houses: the rest were "vaults.") It was a composite building of three storeys, in blackish-crimson brick, with a projecting shop-front, and, above and behind that, two rows of little windows. On the sash of each window was a red cloth roll stuffed with sawdust, to prevent draughts; plain white blinds descended about six inches from the top of each window. There were no curtains to any of the windows save one; this was the window of the drawing-room, on the first floor at the corner of the Square and King Street. Another window, on the second storey, was peculiar, in that it had neither blind nor pad, and was very dirty; this was the window of an unused room that had a separate staircase to itself, the staircase being barred by a door always locked. Constance and Sophia had lived in continual expectation of the abnormal issuing from that mysterious room, which was next to their own. But they were disappointed. The room had no shameful secret except the incompetence of the architect who had made one house out of three; it was just an empty, unemployable room. The building had also a considerable frontage on King Street, where, behind the shop, was sheltered the parlour, with a large window and a door that led directly by two steps into the street. A strange peculiarity of the shop was that it bore no signboard. Once it had had a large signboard which a memorable gale had blown into the Square. Mr Baines had decided not to replace it. He had always objected to what he called "puffing," and for this reason would never hear of such a thing as a clearance sale. The hatred of "puffing" grew on him until he came to regard even a sign as "puffing." Uninformed persons who wished to find Baines's must ask and learn. For Mr Baines, to have replaced the sign would have been to condone, yea, to participate in, the modern craze for unscrupulous self-advertisement. This abstention of Mr Baines's from indulgence in signboards was somehow accepted by the more thoughtful members of the community as evidence that the height of Mr Baines's principles was greater even than they had imagined.

Constance and Sophia were the daughters of this credit to human nature. He had no other children.

II

They pressed their noses against the window of the showroom, and gazed down into the Square as

perpendicularly as the projecting front of the shop would allow. The showroom was over the millinery and silken half of the shop. Over the woollen and shirting half were the drawing-room and the chief bedroom. When in quest of articles of coquetry, you mounted from the shop by a curving stair, and your head gradually rose level with a large apartment having a mahogany counter in front of the window and along one side, yellow linoleum on the floor, many cardboard boxes, a magnificent hinged cheval glass, and two chairs. The window-sill being lower than the counter, there was a gulf between the panes and the back of the counter, into which important articles such as scissors, pencils, chalk, and artificial flowers were continually disappearing: another proof of the architect's incompetence.

The girls could only press their noses against the window by kneeling on the counter, and this they were doing. Constance's nose was snub, but agreeably so. Sophia had a fine Roman nose; she was a beautiful creature, beautiful and handsome at the same time. They were both of them rather like racehorses, quivering with delicate, sensitive, and luxuriant life; exquisite, enchanting proof of the circulation of the blood; innocent, artful, roguish, prim, gushing, ignorant, and miraculously wise. Their ages were sixteen and fifteen; it is an epoch when, if one is frank, one must admit that one has nothing to learn: one has learnt simply everything in the previous six months.

"There she goes!" exclaimed Sophia.

Up the Square, from the corner of King Street, passed a woman in a new bonnet with pink strings, and a new blue dress that sloped at the shoulders and grew to a vast circumference at the hem. Through the silent sunlit solitude of the Square (for it was Thursday afternoon, and all the shops shut except the confectioner's and one chemist's) this bonnet and this dress floated northwards in search of romance, under the relentless eyes of Constance and Sophia. Within them, somewhere, was the soul of Maggie, domestic servant at Baines's. Maggie had been at the shop since before the creation of Constance and Sophia. She lived seventeen hours of each day in an underground kitchen and larder, and the other seven in an attic, never going out except to chapel on Sunday evenings, and once a month on Thursday afternoons. "Followers" were most strictly forbidden to her; but on rare occasions an aunt from Longshaw was permitted as a tremendous favour to see her in the subterranean den. Everybody, including herself, considered that she had a good "place," and was well treated. It was undeniable, for instance, that she was allowed to fall in love exactly as she chose, provided she did not "carry on" in the kitchen or the yard. And as a fact, Maggie had fallen in love. In seventeen years she had been engaged eleven times. No one could conceive how that ugly and powerful organism could softly languish to the undoing of even a butty-collier, nor why, having caught a man in her sweet toils, she could ever be imbecile enough to set him free. There are, however, mysteries in the souls of Maggies. The drudge had probably been affianced oftener than any woman in Bursley. Her employers were so accustomed to an interesting announcement that for years they had taken to saying naught in reply but "Really, Maggie!" Engagements and tragic partings were Maggie's pastime. Fixed otherwise, she might have studied the piano instead.

"No gloves, of course!" Sophia criticized.

"Well, you can't expect her to have gloves," said Constance.

Then a pause, as the bonnet and dress neared the top of the Square.

"Supposing she turns round and sees us?" Constance suggested.

"I don't care if she does," said Sophia, with a haughtiness almost impassioned; and her head trembled slightly.

There were, as usual, several loafers at the top of the Square, in the corner between the bank and the "Marquis of Granby." And one of these loafers stepped forward and shook hands with an obviously willing Maggie. Clearly it was a rendezvous, open, unashamed. The, twelfth victim had been selected by the virgin of forty, whose kiss would not have melted lard! The couple disappeared together down Oldcastle Street.

"*Well!*" cried Constance. "Did you ever see such a thing?"

While Sophia, short of adequate words, flushed and bit her lip.

With the profound, instinctive cruelty of youth, Constance and Sophia had assembled in their favourite haunt, the showroom, expressly to deride Maggie in her new clothes. They obscurely thought that a woman so ugly and soiled as Maggie was had no right to possess new clothes. Even her desire to take the air of a Thursday afternoon seemed to them unnatural and somewhat reprehensible. Why should she want to stir out of her kitchen? As for her tender yearnings, they positively grudged these to Maggie. That Maggie should give rein to chaste passion was more than grotesque; it was offensive and wicked. But let it not for an instant be doubted that they were nice, kindhearted, well-behaved, and delightful girls! Because they were. They were not angels.

"It's too ridiculous!" said Sophia, severely. She had youth, beauty, and rank in her favour. And to her it really was ridiculous.

"Poor old Maggie!" Constance murmured. Constance was foolishly good-natured, a perfect manufactory of excuses for other people; and her benevolence was eternally rising up and overpowering her reason.

"What time did mother say she should be back?" Sophia asked.

"Not until supper."

"Oh! Hallelujah!" Sophia burst out, clasping her hands in joy. And they both slid down from the counter

just as if they had been little boys, and not, as their mother called them, “great girls.”

“Let’s go and play the Osborne quadrilles,” Sophia suggested (the Osborne quadrilles being a series of dances arranged to be performed on drawing-room pianos by four jewelled hands).

“I couldn’t think of it,” said Constance, with a precocious gesture of seriousness. In that gesture, and in her tone, was something which conveyed to Sophia: “Sophia, how can you be so utterly blind to the gravity of our fleeting existence as to ask me to go and strum the piano with you?” Yet a moment before she had been a little boy.

“Why not?” Sophia demanded.

“I shall never have another chance like to-day for getting on with this,” said Constance, picking up a bag from the counter.

She sat down and took from the bag a piece of loosely woven canvas, on which she was embroidering a bunch of roses in coloured wools. The canvas had once been stretched on a frame, but now, as the delicate labour of the petals and leaves was done, and nothing remained to do but the monotonous background, Constance was content to pin the stuff to her knee. With the long needle and several skeins of mustard-tinted wool, she bent over the canvas and resumed the filling-in of the tiny squares. The whole design was in squares—the gradations of red and greens, the curves of the smallest buds—all was contrived in squares, with a result that mimicked a fragment of uncompromising Axminster carpet. Still, the fine texture of the wool, the regular and rapid grace of those fingers moving incessantly at back and front of the canvas, the gentle sound of the wool as it passed through the holes, and the intent, youthful earnestness of that lowered gaze, excused and invested with charm an activity which, on artistic grounds, could not possibly be justified. The canvas was destined to adorn a gilt firescreen in the drawing-room, and also to form a birthday gift to Mrs Baines from her elder daughter. But whether the enterprise was as secret from Mrs Baines as Constance hoped, none save Mrs Baines knew.

“Con,” murmured Sophia, “you’re too sickening sometimes.”

“Well,” said Constance, blandly, “it’s no use pretending that this hasn’t got to be finished before we go back to school, because it has.”

Sophia wandered about, a prey ripe for the Evil One. “Oh,” she exclaimed joyously—even ecstatically—looking behind the cheval glass, “here’s mother’s new skirt! Miss Dunn’s been putting the gimp on it! Oh, mother, what a proud thing you will be!”

Constance heard swishings behind the glass. “What are you doing, Sophia?”

“Nothing.”

“You surely aren’t putting that skirt on?”

“Why not?”

“You’ll catch it finely, I can tell you!”

Without further defence, Sophia sprang out from behind the immense glass. She had already shed a notable part of her own costume, and the flush of mischief was in her face. She ran across to the other side of the room and examined carefully a large coloured print that was affixed to the wall.

This print represented fifteen sisters, all of the same height and slimness of figure, all of the same age—about twenty-five or so—and all with exactly the same haughty and bored beauty. That they were in truth sisters was clear from the facial resemblance between them; their demeanour indicated that they were princesses, offspring of some impossibly prolific king and queen. Those hands had never toiled, nor had those features ever relaxed from the smile of courts. The princesses moved in a landscape of marble steps and verandas, with a bandstand and strange trees in the distance. One was in a riding-habit, another in evening attire, another dressed for tea, another for the theatre; another seemed to be ready to go to bed. One held a little girl by the hand; it could not have been her own little girl, for these princesses were far beyond human passions. Where had she obtained the little girl? Why was one sister going to the theatre, another to tea, another to the stable, and another to bed? Why was one in a heavy mantle, and another sheltering from the sun’s rays under a parasol? The picture was drenched in mystery, and the strangest thing about it was that all these highnesses were apparently content with the most ridiculous and out-moded fashions. Absurd hats, with veils flying behind; absurd bonnets, fitting close to the head, and spotted; absurd coiffures that nearly lay on the nape; absurd, clumsy sleeves; absurd waists, almost above the elbow’s level; absurd scolloped jackets! And the skirts! What a sight were those skirts! They were nothing but vast decorated pyramids; on the summit of each was stuck the upper half of a princess. It was astounding that princesses should consent to be so preposterous and so uncomfortable. But Sophia perceived nothing uncanny in the picture, which bore the legend: “Newest summer fashions from Paris. Gratis supplement to *Myra’s Journal*.” Sophia had never imagined anything more stylish, lovely, and dashing than the raiment of the fifteen princesses.

For Constance and Sophia had the disadvantage of living in the middle ages. The crinoline had not quite reached its full circumference, and the dress-improver had not even been thought of. In all the Five Towns there was not a public bath, nor a free library, nor a municipal park, nor a telephone, nor yet a board-school. People had not understood the vital necessity of going away to the seaside every year. Bishop Colenso had just staggered Christianity by his shameless notions on the Pentateuch. Half Lancashire was starving on account of the American war. Garroting was the chief amusement of the homicidal classes. Incredible as it

may appear, there was nothing but a horse-tram running between Bursley and Hanbridge—and that only twice an hour; and between the other towns no stage of any kind! One went to Longshaw as one now goes to Peking. It was an era so dark and backward that one might wonder how people could sleep in their beds at night for thinking about their sad state.

Happily the inhabitants of the Five Towns in that era were passably pleased with themselves, and they never even suspected that they were not quite modern and quite awake. They thought that the intellectual, the industrial, and the social movements had gone about as far as these movements could go, and they were amazed at their own progress. Instead of being humble and ashamed they actually showed pride in their pitiful achievements. They ought to have looked forward meekly to the prodigious feats of posterity; but, having too little faith and too much conceit, they were content to look behind and make comparisons with the past. They did not foresee the miraculous generation which is us. A poor, blind, complacent people! The ludicrous horse-car was typical of them. The driver rang a huge bell, five minutes before starting, that could be heard from the Wesleyan Chapel to the Cock Yard, and then after deliberations and hesitations the vehicle rolled off on its rails into unknown dangers while passengers shouted good-bye. At Bleakridge it had to stop for the turnpike, and it was assisted up the mountains of Leveson Place and Sutherland Street (towards Hanbridge) by a third horse, on whose back was perched a tiny, whip-cracking boy; that boy lived like a shuttle on the road between Leveson Place and Sutherland Street, and even in wet weather he was the envy of all other boys. After half an hour's perilous transit the car drew up solemnly in a narrow street by the *Signal* office in Hanbridge, and the ruddy driver, having revolved many times the polished iron handle of his sole brake, turned his attention to his passengers in calm triumph, dismissing them with a sort of unsung doxology.

And this was regarded as the last word of traction! A whip-cracking boy on a tip horse! Oh, blind, blind! You could not foresee the hundred and twenty electric cars that now rush madly bumping and thundering at twenty miles an hour through all the main streets of the district!

So that naturally Sophia, infected with the pride of her period, had no misgivings whatever concerning the final elegance of the princesses. She studied them as the fifteen apostles of the *ne plus ultra;* then, having taken some flowers and plumes out of a box, amid warnings from Constance, she retreated behind the glass, and presently emerged as a great lady in the style of the princesses. Her mother's tremendous new gown ballooned about her in all its fantastic richness and expensiveness. And with the gown she had put on her mother's importance—that mien of assured authority, of capacity tested in many a crisis, which characterized Mrs Baines, and which Mrs Baines seemed to impart to her dresses even before she had regularly worn them. For it was a fact that Mrs Baines's empty garments inspired respect, as though some essence had escaped from her and remained in them.

"Sophia!"

Constance stayed her needle, and, without lifting her head, gazed, with eyes raised from the wool-work, motionless at the posturing figure of her sister. It was sacrilege that she was witnessing, a prodigious irreverence. She was conscious of an expectation that punishment would instantly fall on this daring impious child. But she, who never felt these mad, amazing impulses, could nevertheless only smile fearfully.

"Sophia!" she breathed, with an intensity of alarm that merged into condoning admiration. "Whatever will you do next?"

Sophia's lovely flushed face crowned the extraordinary structure like a blossom, scarcely controlling its laughter. She was as tall as her mother, and as imperious, as crested, and proud; and in spite of the pigtail, the girlish semi-circular comb, and the loose foal-like limbs, she could support as well as her mother the majesty of the gimp-embroidered dress. Her eyes sparkled with all the challenges of the untried virgin as she minced about the showroom. Abounding life inspired her movements. The confident and fierce joy of youth shone on her brow. "What thing on earth equals me?" she seemed to demand with enchanting and yet ruthless arrogance. She was the daughter of a respected, bedridden draper in an insignificant town, lost in the central labyrinth of England, if you like; yet what manner of man, confronted with her, would or could have denied her naïve claim to dominion? She stood, in her mother's hoops, for the desire of the world. And in the innocence of her soul she knew it! The heart of a young girl mysteriously speaks and tells her of her power long ere she can use her power. If she can find nothing else to subdue, you may catch her in the early years subduing a gate-post or drawing homage from an empty chair. Sophia's experimental victim was Constance, with suspended needle and soft glance that shot out from the lowered face.

Then Sophia fell, in stepping backwards; the pyramid was overbalanced; great distended rings of silk trembled and swayed gigantically on the floor, and Sophia's small feet lay like the feet of a doll on the rim of the largest circle, which curved and arched above them like a cavern's mouth. The abrupt transition of her features from assured pride to ludicrous astonishment and alarm was comical enough to have sent into wild uncharitable laughter any creature less humane than Constance. But Constance sprang to her, a single embodied instinct of benevolence, with her snub nose, and tried to raise her.

"Oh, Sophia!" she cried compassionately—that voice seemed not to know the tones of reproof—"I do hope you've not messed it, because mother would be so—"

The words were interrupted by the sound of groans beyond the door leading to the bedrooms. The groans,

indicating direct physical torment, grew louder. The two girls stared, wonder-struck and afraid, at the door, Sophia with her dark head raised, and Constance with her arms round Sophia's waist. The door opened, letting in a much-magnified sound of groans, and there entered a youngish, undersized man, who was frantically clutching his head in his hands and contorting all the muscles of his face. On perceiving the sculptural group of two prone, interlocked girls, one enveloped in a crinoline, and the other with a wool-work bunch of flowers pinned to her knee, he jumped back, ceased groaning, arranged his face, and seriously tried to pretend that it was not he who had been vocal in anguish, that, indeed, he was just passing as a casual, ordinary wayfarer through the showroom to the shop below. He blushed darkly; and the girls also blushed.

"Oh, I beg pardon, I'm sure!" said this youngish man suddenly; and with a swift turn he disappeared whence he had come.

He was Mr Povey, a person universally esteemed, both within and without the shop, the surrogate of bedridden Mr Baines, the unfailing comfort and stand-by of Mrs Baines, the fount and radiating centre of order and discipline in the shop; a quiet, diffident, secretive, tedious, and obstinate youngish man, absolutely faithful, absolutely efficient in his sphere; without brilliance, without distinction; perhaps rather little-minded, certainly narrow-minded; but what a force in the shop! The shop was inconceivable without Mr Povey. He was under twenty and not out of his apprenticeship when Mr Baines had been struck down, and he had at once proved his worth. Of the assistants, he alone slept in the house. His bedroom was next to that of his employer; there was a door between the two chambers, and the two steps led down from the larger to the less.

The girls regained their feet, Sophia with Constance's help. It was not easy to right a capsized crinoline. They both began to laugh nervously, with a trace of hysteria.

"I thought he'd gone to the dentist's," whispered Constance.

Mr Povey's toothache had been causing anxiety in the microcosm for two days, and it had been clearly understood at dinner that Thursday morning that Mr Povey was to set forth to Oulsnam Bros, the dentists at Hillport, without any delay. Only on Thursdays and Sundays did Mr Povey dine with the family. On other days he dined later, by himself, but at the family table, when Mrs Baines or one of the assistants could "relieve" him in the shop. Before starting out to visit her elder sister at Axe, Mrs Baines had insisted to Mr Povey that he had eaten practically nothing but "slops" for twenty-four hours, and that if he was not careful she would have him on her hands. He had replied in his quietest, most sagacious, matter-of-fact tone—the tone that carried weight with all who heard it—that he had only been waiting for Thursday afternoon, and should of course go instantly to Oulsnams' and have the thing attended to in a proper manner. He had even added that persons who put off going to the dentist's were simply sowing trouble for themselves.

None could possibly have guessed that Mr Povey was afraid of going to the dentist's. But such was the case. He had not dared to set forth. The paragon of common sense, pictured by most people as being somehow unliable to human frailties, could not yet screw himself up to the point of ringing a dentist's door-bell.

"He did look funny," said Sophia. "I wonder what he thought. I couldn't help laughing!"

Constance made no answer; but when Sophia had resumed her own clothes, and it was ascertained beyond doubt that the new dress had not suffered, and Constance herself was calmly stitching again, she said, poising her needle as she had poised it to watch Sophia:

"I was just wondering whether something oughtn't to be done for Mr Povey."

"What?" Sophia demanded.

"Has he gone back to his bedroom?"

"Let's go and listen," said Sophia the adventuress.

They went, through the showroom door, past the foot of the stairs leading to the second storey, down the long corridor broken in the middle by two steps and carpeted with a narrow bordered carpet whose parallel lines increased its apparent length. They went on tip-toe, sticking close to one another. Mr Povey's door was slightly ajar. They listened; not a sound.

"Mr Povey!" Constance coughed discreetly.

No reply. It was Sophia who pushed the door open. Constance made an elderly prim plucking gesture at Sophia's bare arm, but she followed Sophia gingerly into the forbidden room, which was, however, empty. The bed had been ruffled, and on it lay a book, *The Harvest of a Quiet Eye*.

"Harvest of a quiet tooth!" Sophia whispered, giggling very low.

"Hsh!" Constance put her lips forward.

From the next room came a regular, muffled, oratorical sound, as though someone had begun many years ago to address a meeting and had forgotten to leave off and never would leave off. They were familiar with the sound, and they quitted Mr Povey's chamber in fear of disturbing it. At the same moment Mr Povey reappeared, this time in the drawing-room doorway at the other extremity of the long corridor. He seemed to be trying ineffectually to flee from his tooth as a murderer tries to flee from his conscience.

"Oh, Mr Povey!" said Constance quickly—for he had surprised them coming out of his bedroom; "we were just looking for you."

"To see if we could do anything for you," Sophia added.

"Oh no, thanks!" said Mr Povey.

Then he began to come down the corridor, slowly.

"You haven't been to the dentist's," said Constance sympathetically.

"No, I haven't," said Mr Povey, as if Constance was indicating a fact which had escaped his attention. "The truth is, I thought it looked like rain, and if I'd got wet—you see—"

Miserable Mr Povey!

"Yes," said Constance, "you certainly ought to keep out of draughts. Don't you think it would be a good thing if you went and sat in the parlour? There's a fire there."

"I shall be all right, thank you," said Mr Povey. And after a pause: "Well, thanks, I will."

III

The girls made way for him to pass them at the head of the twisting stairs which led down to the parlour. Constance followed, and Sophia followed Constance.

"Have father's chair," said Constance.

There were two rocking-chairs with fluted backs covered by anti-macassars, one on either side of the hearth. That to the left was still entitled "father's chair," though its owner had not sat in it since long before the Crimean war, and would never sit in it again.

"I think I'd sooner have the other one," said Mr Povey, "because it's on the right side, you see." And he touched his right cheek.

Having taken Mrs Baines's chair, he bent his face down to the fire, seeking comfort from its warmth. Sophia poked the fire, whereupon Mr Povey abruptly withdrew his face. He then felt something light on his shoulders. Constance had taken the antimacassar from the back of the chair, and protected him with it from the draughts. He did not instantly rebel, and therefore was permanently barred from rebellion. He was entrapped by the antimacassar. It formally constituted him an invalid, and Constance and Sophia his nurses. Constance drew the curtain across the street door. No draught could come from the window, for the window was not "made to open." The age of ventilation had not arrived. Sophia shut the other two doors. And, each near a door, the girls gazed at Mr Povey behind his back, irresolute, but filled with a delicious sense of responsibility.

The situation was on a different plane now. The seriousness of Mr Povey's toothache, which became more and more manifest, had already wiped out the ludicrous memory of the encounter in the showroom. Looking at these two big girls, with their shortsleeved black frocks and black aprons, and their smooth hair, and their composed serious faces, one would have judged them incapable of the least lapse from an archangelic primness; Sophia especially presented a marvellous imitation of saintly innocence. As for the toothache, its action on Mr Povey was apparently periodic; it gathered to a crisis like a wave, gradually, the torture increasing till the wave broke and left Mr Povey exhausted, but free for a moment from pain. These crises recurred about once a minute. And now, accustomed to the presence of the young virgins, and having tacitly acknowledged by his acceptance of the antimacassar that his state was abnormal, he gave himself up frankly to affliction. He concealed nothing of his agony, which was fully displayed by sudden contortions of his frame, and frantic oscillations of the rocking-chair. Presently, as he lay back enfeebled in the wash of a spent wave, he murmured with a sick man's voice:

"I suppose you haven't got any laudanum?"

The girls started into life. "Laudanum, Mr Povey?"

"Yes, to hold in my mouth."

He sat up, tense; another wave was forming. The excellent fellow was lost to all self-respect, all decency.

"There's sure to be some in mother's cupboard," said Sophia.

Constance, who bore Mrs Baines's bunch of keys at her girdle, a solemn trust, moved a little fearfully to a corner cupboard which was hung in the angle to the right of the projecting fireplace, over a shelf on which stood a large copper tea-urn. That corner cupboard, of oak inlaid with maple and ebony in a simple border pattern, was typical of the room. It was of a piece with the deep green "flock" wallpaper, and the tea-urn, and the rocking-chairs with their antimacassars, and the harmonium in rosewood with a Chinese papier-mâché tea-caddy on the top of it; even with the carpet, certainly the most curious parlour carpet that ever was, being made of lengths of the stair-carpet sewn together side by side. That corner cupboard was already old in service; it had held the medicines of generations. It gleamed darkly with the grave and genuine polish which comes from ancient use alone. The key which Constance chose from her bunch was like the cupboard, smooth and shining with years; it fitted and turned very easily, yet with a firm snap. The single wide door opened sedately as a portal.

The girls examined the sacred interior, which had the air of being inhabited by an army of diminutive prisoners, each crying aloud with the full strength of its label to be set free on a mission.

"There it is!" said Sophia eagerly.

And there it was: a blue bottle, with a saffron label, "Caution. POISON, Laudanum. Charles Critchlow, M.P.S. Dispensing Chemist. St Luke's Square, Bursley."

Those large capitals frightened the girls. Constance took the bottle as she might have taken a loaded

revolver, and she glanced at Sophia. Their omnipotent, all-wise mother was not present to tell them what to do. They, who had never decided, had to decide now. And Constance was the elder. Must this fearsome stuff, whose very name was a name of fear, be introduced in spite of printed warnings into Mr Povey's mouth? The responsibility was terrifying.

"Perhaps I'd just better ask Mr Critchlow," Constance faltered.

The expectation of beneficent laudanum had enlivened Mr Povey, had already, indeed, by a sort of suggestion, half cured his toothache.

"Oh no!" he said. "No need to ask Mr Critchlow . . . Two or three drops in a little water." He showed impatience to be at the laudanum.

The girls knew that an antipathy existed between the chemist and Mr Povey.

"It's sure to be all right," said Sophia. "I'll get the water."

With youthful cries and alarms they succeeded in pouring four mortal dark drops (one more than Constance intended) into a cup containing a little water. And as they handed the cup to Mr Povey their faces were the faces of affrighted comical conspirators. They felt so old and they looked so young.

Mr Povey inbibed eagerly of the potion, put the cup on the mantelpiece, and then tilted his head to the right so as to submerge the affected tooth. In this posture he remained, awaiting the sweet influence of the remedy. The girls, out of a nice modesty, turned away, for Mr Povey must not swallow the medicine, and they preferred to leave him unhampered in the solution of a delicate problem. When next they examined him, he was leaning back in the rocking-chair with his mouth open and his eyes shut.

"Has it done you any good, Mr Povey?"

"I think I'll lie down on the sofa for a minute," was Mr Povey's strange reply; and forthwith he sprang up and flung himself on to the horse-hair sofa between the fireplace and the window, where he lay stripped of all his dignity, a mere beaten animal in a grey suit with peculiar coat-tails, and a very creased waistcoat, and a lapel that was planted with pins, and a paper collar and close-fitting paper cuffs.

Constance ran after him with the antimacassar, which she spread softly on his shoulders; and Sophia put another one over his thin little legs, all drawn up.

They then gazed at their handiwork, with secret self-accusations and the most dreadful misgivings.

"He surely never swallowed it!" Constance whispered.

"He's asleep, anyhow," said Sophia, more loudly.

Mr Povey was certainly asleep, and his mouth was very wide open—like a shop-door. The only question was whether his sleep was not an eternal sleep; the only question was whether he was not out of his pain for ever.

Then he snored—horribly; his snore seemed a portent of disaster.

Sophia approached him as though he were a bomb, and stared, growing bolder, into his mouth.

"Oh, Con," she summoned her sister, "do come and look! It's too droll!"

In an instant all their four eyes were exploring the singular landscape of Mr Povey's mouth. In a corner, to the right of that interior, was one sizeable fragment of a tooth, that was attached to Mr Povey by the slenderest tie, so that at each respiration of Mr Povey, when his body slightly heaved and the gale moaned in the cavern, this tooth moved separately, showing that its long connexion with Mr Povey was drawing to a close.

"That's the one," said Sophia, pointing. "And it's as loose as anything. Did you ever see such a funny thing?"

The extreme funniness of the thing had lulled in Sophia the fear of Mr Povey's sudden death.

"I'll see how much he's taken," said Constance, preoccupied, going to the mantelpiece.

"Why, I do believe—" Sophia began, and then stopped, glancing at the sewing-machine, which stood next to the sofa.

It was a Howe sewing-machine. It had a little tool-drawer, and in the tool-drawer was a small pair of pliers. Constance, engaged in sniffing at the lees of the potion in order to estimate its probable deadliness, heard the well-known click of the little tool-drawer, and then she saw Sophia nearing Mr Povey's mouth with the pliers.

"Sophia!" she exclaimed, aghast. "What in the name of goodness are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Sophia.

The next instant Mr Povey sprang out of his laudanum dream.

"It jumps!" he muttered; and, after a reflective pause, "but it's much better." He had at any rate escaped death.

Sophia's right hand was behind her back.

Just then a hawker passed down King Street, crying mussels and cockles.

"Oh!" Sophia almost shrieked. "Do let's have mussels and cockles for tea!" And she rushed to the door, and unlocked and opened it, regardless of the risk of draughts to Mr Povey.

In those days people often depended upon the caprices of hawkers for the tastiness of their teas; but it was an adventurous age, when errant knights of commerce were numerous and enterprising. You went on to your doorstep, caught your meal as it passed, withdrew, cooked it and ate it, quite in the manner of the early Briton.

Constance was obliged to join her sister on the top step. Sophia descended to the second step.

"Fresh mussels and cockles all alive, oh!" bawled the hawker, looking across the road in the April breeze. He was the celebrated Hollins, a professional Irish drunkard, aged in iniquity, who cheerfully saluted magistrates in the street, and referred to the workhouse, which he occasionally visited, as the Bastille.

Sophia was trembling from head to foot.

"What *are* you laughing at, you silly thing?" Constance demanded.

Sophia surreptitiously showed the pliers, which she had partly thrust into her pocket. Between their points was a most perceptible, and even recognizable, fragment of Mr Povey.

This was the crown of Sophia's career as a perpetrator of the unutterable.

"What!" Constance's face showed the final contortions of that horrified incredulity which is forced to believe.

Sophia nudged her violently to remind her that they were in the street, and also quite close to Mr Povey.

"Now, my little missies," said the vile Hollins. "Threepence a pint, and how's your honoured mother today? Yes, fresh, so help me God!"

CHAPTER II

THE TOOTH

I

The two girls came up the unlighted stone staircase which led from Maggie's cave to the door of the parlour. Sophia, foremost, was carrying a large tray, and Constance a small one. Constance, who had nothing on her tray but a teapot, a bowl of steaming and balmy-scented mussels and cockles, and a plate of hot buttered toast, went directly into the parlour on the left. Sophia had in her arms the entire material and apparatus of a high tea for two including eggs, jam, and toast (covered with the slop-basin turned upside-down), but not including mussels and cockles. She turned to the right, passed along the corridor by the cutting-out room, up two steps into the sheeted and shuttered gloom of the closed shop, up the showroom stairs, through the showroom, and so into the bedroom corridor. Experience had proved it easier to make this long detour than to round the difficult corner of the parlour stairs with a large loaded tray. Sophia knocked with the edge of the tray at the door of the principal bedroom. The muffled oratorical sound from within suddenly ceased, and the door was opened by a very tall, very thin, black-bearded man, who looked down at Sophia as if to demand what she meant by such an interruption.

"I've brought the tea, Mr Critchlow," said Sophia.

And Mr Critchlow carefully accepted the tray.

"Is that my little Sophia?" asked a faint voice from the depths of the bedroom.

"Yes, father," said Sophia.

But she did not attempt to enter the room. Mr Critchlow put the tray on a white-clad chest of drawers near the door, and then he shut the door with no ceremony. Mr Critchlow was John Baines's oldest and closest friend, though decidedly younger than the draper. He frequently "popped in" to have a word with the invalid; but Thursday afternoon was his special afternoon, consecrated by him to the service of the sick. From two o'clock precisely till eight o'clock precisely he took charge of John Baines, reigning autocratically over the bedroom. It was known that he would not tolerate invasions, nor even ambassadorial visits. No! He gave up his weekly holiday to this business of friendship, and he must be allowed to conduct the business in his own way. Mrs Baines herself avoided disturbing Mr Critchlow's ministrations on her husband. She was glad to do so; for Mr Baines was never to be left alone under any circumstances, and the convenience of being able to rely upon the presence of a staid member of the Pharmaceutical Society for six hours of a given day every week outweighed the slight affront to her prerogatives as wife and house-mistress. Mr Critchlow was an extremely peculiar man, but when he was in the bedroom she could leave the house with an easy mind. Moreover, John Baines enjoyed these Thursday afternoons. For him, there was "none like Charles Critchlow." The two old friends experienced a sort of grim, desiccated happiness, cooped up together in the bedroom, secure from women and fools generally. How they spent the time did not seem to be certainly known, but the impression was that politics occupied them. Undoubtedly Mr Critchlow was an extremely peculiar man. He

was a man of habits. He must always have the same things for his tea. Black-currant jam, for instance. (He called it “preserve.”) The idea of offering Mr Critchlow a tea which did not comprise black-currant jam was inconceivable by the intelligence of St Luke’s Square. Thus for years past, in the fruit-preserving season, when all the house and all the shop smelt richly of fruit boiling in sugar, Mrs Baines had filled an extra number of jars with black-currant jam, “because Mr Critchlow wouldn’t *touch* any other sort.”

So Sophia, faced with the shut door of the bedroom, went down to the parlour by the shorter route. She knew that on going up again, after tea, she would find the devastated tray on the doormat.

Constance was helping Mr Povey to mussels and cockles. And Mr Povey still wore one of the antimacassars. It must have stuck to his shoulders when he sprang up from the sofa, woollen antimacassars being notoriously parasitic things. Sophia sat down, somewhat self-consciously. The serious Constance was also perturbed. Mr Povey did not usually take tea in the house on Thursday afternoons; his practice was to go out into the great, mysterious world. Never before had he shared a meal with the girls alone. The situation was indubitably unexpected, unforeseen; it was, too, piquant, and what added to its piquancy was the fact that Constance and Sophia were, somehow, responsible for Mr Povey. They felt that they were responsible for him. They had offered the practical sympathy of two intelligent and well-trained young women, born nurses by reason of their sex, and Mr Povey had accepted; he was now on their hands. Sophia’s monstrous, sly operation in Mr Povey’s mouth did not cause either of them much alarm, Constance having apparently recovered from the first shock of it. They had discussed it in the kitchen while preparing the teas. Constance’s extraordinarily severe and dictatorial tone in condemning it had led to a certain heat. But the success of the impudent wench justified it despite any irrefutable argument to the contrary. Mr Povey was better already, and he evidently remained in ignorance of his loss.

“Have some?” Constance asked of Sophia, with a large spoon hovering over the bowl of shells.

“Yes, *please*,” said Sophia, positively.

Constance well knew that she would have some, and had only asked from sheer nervousness.

“Pass your plate, then.”

Now when everybody was served with mussels, cockles, tea, and toast, and Mr Povey had been persuaded to cut the crust off his toast, and Constance had, quite unnecessarily, warned Sophia against the deadly green stuff in the mussels, and Constance had further pointed out that the evenings were getting longer, and Mr Povey had agreed that they were, there remained nothing to say. An irksome silence fell on them all, and no one could lift it off. Tiny clashes of shell and crockery sounded with the terrible clearness of noises heard in the night. Each person avoided the eyes of the others. And both Constance and Sophia kept straightening their bodies at intervals, and expanding their chests, and then looking at their plates; occasionally a prim cough was discharged. It was a sad example of the difference between young women’s dreams of social brilliance and the reality of life. These girls got more and more girlish, until, from being women at the administering of laudanum, they sank back to about eight years of age—perfect children—at the tea-table.

The tension was snapped by Mr Povey. “My God!” he muttered, moved by a startling discovery to this impious and disgraceful oath (he, the pattern and exemplar—and in the presence of innocent girlhood, too!). “I’ve swallowed it!”

“Swallowed what, Mr Povey?” Constance inquired.

The tip of Mr Povey’s tongue made a careful voyage of inspection all round the right side of his mouth.

“Oh yes!” he said, as if solemnly accepting the inevitable. “I’ve swallowed it!”

Sophia’s face was now scarlet; she seemed to be looking for some place to hide it. Constance could not think of anything to say.

“That tooth has been loose for two years,” said Mr Povey, “and now I’ve swallowed it with a mussel.”

“Oh, Mr Povey!” Constance cried in confusion, and added, “There’s one good thing, it can’t hurt you any more now.”

“Oh!” said Mr Povey. “It wasn’t *that* tooth that was hurting me. It’s an old stump at the back that’s upset me so this last day or two. I wish it had been.”

Sophia had her teacup close to her red face. At these words of Mr Povey her cheeks seemed to fill out like plump apples. She dashed the cup into its saucer, spilling tea recklessly, and then ran from the room with stifled snorts.

“Sophia!” Constance protested.

“I must just—” Sophia incoherently spluttered in the doorway. “I shall be all right. Don’t—”

Constance, who had risen, sat down again.

II

Sophia fled along the passage leading to the shop and took refuge in the cutting-out room, a room which the astonishing architect had devised upon what must have been a backyard of one of the three constituent houses. It was lighted from its roof, and only a wooden partition, eight feet high, separated it from the passage. Here Sophia gave rein to her feelings; she laughed and cried together, weeping generously into her handkerchief and wildly giggling, in a hysteria which she could not control. The spectacle of Mr Povey

mourning for a tooth which he thought he had swallowed, but which in fact lay all the time in her pocket, seemed to her to be by far the most ridiculous, side-splitting thing that had ever happened or could happen on earth. It utterly overcame her. And when she fancied that she had exhausted and conquered its surpassing ridiculousness, this ridiculousness seized her again and rolled her anew in depths of mad, trembling laughter.

Gradually she grew calmer. She heard the parlour door open, and Constance descend the kitchen steps with a rattling tray of tea-things. Tea, then, was finished, without her! Constance did not remain in the kitchen, because the cups and saucers were left for Maggie to wash up as a fitting *coda* to Maggie's monthly holiday. The parlour door closed. And the vision of Mr Povey in his antimacassar swept Sophia off into another convulsion of laughter and tears. Upon this the parlour door opened again, and Sophia choked herself into silence while Constance hastened along the passage. In a minute Constance returned with her woolwork, which she had got from the showroom, and the parlour received her. Not the least curiosity on the part of Constance as to what had become of Sophia!

At length Sophia, a faint meditative smile being all that was left of the storm in her, ascended slowly to the showroom, through the shop. Nothing there of interest! Thence she wandered towards the drawing-room, and encountered Mr Critchlow's tray on the mat. She picked it up and carried it by way of the showroom and shop down to the kitchen, where she dreamily munched two pieces of toast that had cooled to the consistency of leather. She mounted the stone steps and listened at the door of the parlour. No sound! This seclusion of Mr Povey and Constance was really very strange. She roved right round the house, and descended creepingly by the twisted house-stairs, and listened intently at the other door of the parlour. She now detected a faint regular snore. Mr Povey, a prey to laudanum and mussels, was sleeping while Constance worked at her firescreen! It was now in the highest degree odd, this seclusion of Mr Povey and Constance; unlike anything in Sophia's experience! She wanted to go into the parlour, but she could not bring herself to do so. She crept away again, forlorn and puzzled, and next discovered herself in the bedroom which she shared with Constance at the top of the house; she lay down in the dusk on the bed and began to read *The Days of Bruce;* but she read only with her eyes.

Later, she heard movements on the house-stairs, and the familiar whining creak of the door at the foot thereof. She skipped lightly to the door of the bedroom.

"Good night, Mr Povey. I hope you'll be able to sleep."

Constance's voice!

"It will probably come on again."

Mr Povey's voice, pessimistic!

Then the shutting of doors. It was almost dark. She went back to the bed, expecting a visit from Constance. But a clock struck eight, and all the various phenomena connected with the departure of Mr Critchlow occurred one after another. At the same time Maggie came home from the land of romance. Then long silences! Constance was now immured with her father, it being her "turn" to nurse. Maggie was washing up in her cave, and Mr Povey was lost to sight in his bedroom. Then Sophia heard her mother's lively, commanding knock on the King Street door. Dusk had definitely yielded to black night in the bed-room. Sophia dozed and dreamed. When she awoke, her ear caught the sound of knocking. She jumped up, tiptoed to the landing, and looked over the balustrade, whence she had a view of all the first-floor corridor. The gas had been lighted; through the round aperture at the top of the porcelain globe she could see the wavering flame. It was her mother, still bonneted, who was knocking at the door of Mr Povey's room. Constance stood in the doorway of her parents' room. Mrs Baines knocked twice with an interval, and then said to Constance, in a resonant whisper that vibrated up the corridor—

"He seems to be fast asleep. I'd better not disturb him."

"But suppose he wants something in the night?"

"Well, child, I should hear him moving. Sleep's the best thing for him."

Mrs Baines left Mr Povey to the effects of laudanum, and came along the corridor. She was a stout woman, all black stuff and gold chain, and her skirt more than filled the width of the corridor. Sophia watched her habitual heavy mounting gesture as she climbed the two steps that gave variety to the corridor. At the gas-jet she paused, and, putting her hand to the tap, gazed up into the globe.

"Where's Sophia?" she demanded, her eyes fixed on the gas as she lowered the flame.

"I think she must be in bed, mother," said Constance, nonchalantly.

The returned mistress was point by point resuming knowledge and control of that complicated machine—her household.

Then Constance and her mother disappeared into the bedroom, and the door was shut with a gentle, decisive bang that to the silent watcher on the floor above seemed to create a special excluding intimacy round about the figures of Constance and her father and mother. The watcher wondered, with a little prick of jealousy, what they would be discussing in the large bedroom, her father's beard wagging feebly and his long arms on the counterpane. Constance perched at the foot of the bed, and her mother walking to and fro, putting her cameo brooch on the dressing-table or stretching creases out of her gloves. Certainly, in some subtle way, Constance had a standing with her parents which was more confidential than Sophia's.

When Constance came to bed, half an hour later, Sophia was already in bed. The room was fairly spacious. It had been the girls' retreat and fortress since their earliest years. Its features seemed to them as natural and unalterable as the features of a cave to a cave-dweller. It had been repapered twice in their lives, and each papering stood out in their memories like an epoch; a third epoch was due to the replacing of a drugget by a resplendent old carpet degraded from the drawing-room. There was only one bed, the bedstead being of painted iron; they never interfered with each other in that bed, sleeping with a detachment as perfect as if they had slept on opposite sides of St Luke's Square; yet if Constance had one night lain down on the half near the window instead of on the half near the door, the secret nature of the universe would have seemed to be altered. The small fire-grate was filled with a mass of shavings of silver paper; now the rare illnesses which they had suffered were recalled chiefly as periods when that silver paper was crammed into a large slipper-case which hung by the mantelpiece, and a fire of coals unnaturally reigned in its place—the silver paper was part of the order of the world. The sash of the window would not work quite properly, owing to a slight subsidence in the wall, and even when the window was fastened there was always a narrow slit to the left hand between the window and its frame; through this slit came draughts, and thus very keen frosts were remembered by the nights when Mrs Baines caused the sash to be forced and kept at its full height by means of wedges—the slit of exposure was part of the order of the world.

They possessed only one bed, one washstand, and one dressing-table; but in some other respects they were rather fortunate girls, for they had two mahogany wardrobes; this mutual independence as regards wardrobes was due partly to Mrs Baines's strong common sense, and partly to their father's tendency to spoil them a little. They had, moreover, a chest of drawers with a curved front, of which structure Constance occupied two short drawers and one long one, and Sophia two long drawers. On it stood two fancy work-boxes, in which each sister kept jewellery, a savings-bank book, and other treasures, and these boxes were absolutely sacred to their respective owners. They were different, but one was not more magnificent than the other. Indeed, a rigid equality was the rule in the chamber, the single exception being that behind the door were three hooks, of which Constance commanded two.

"Well," Sophia began, when Constance appeared. "How's darling Mr Povey?" She was lying on her back, and smiling at her two hands, which she held up in front of her.

"Asleep," said Constance. "At least mother thinks so. She says sleep is the best thing for him."

" 'It will probably come on again,' " said Sophia.

"What's that you say?" Constance asked, undressing.

" 'It will probably come on again.' "

These words were a quotation from the utterances of darling Mr Povey on the stairs, and Sophia delivered them with an exact imitation of Mr Povey's vocal mannerism.

"Sophia," said Constance, firmly, approaching the bed. "I wish you wouldn't be so silly!" She had benevolently ignored the satirical note in Sophia's first remark, but a strong instinct in her rose up and objected to further derision. "Surely you've done enough for one day!" she added.

For answer Sophia exploded into violent laughter, which she made no attempt to control. She laughed too long and too freely while Constance stared at her.

"*I* don't know what's come over you!" said Constance.

"It's only because I can't look at it without simply going off into fits!" Sophia gasped out. And she held up a tiny object in her left hand.

Constance started, flushing. "You don't mean to say you've kept it!" she protested earnestly. "How horrid you are, Sophia! Give it me at once and let me throw it away. I never heard of such doings. Now give it me!"

"No," Sophia objected, still laughing. "I wouldn't part with it for worlds. It's too lovely."

She had laughed away all her secret resentment against Constance for having ignored her during the whole evening and for being on such intimate terms with their parents. And she was ready to be candidly jolly with Constance.

"Give it me," said Constance, doggedly.

Sophia hid her hand under the clothes. "You can have his old stump, when it comes out, if you like. But not this. What a pity it's the wrong one!"

"Sophia, I'm ashamed of you! Give it me."

Then it was that Sophia first perceived Constance's extreme seriousness. She was surprised and a little intimidated by it. For the expression of Constance's face, usually so benign and calm, was harsh, almost fierce. However, Sophia had a great deal of what is called "spirit," and not even ferocity on the face of mild Constance could intimidate her for more than a few seconds. Her gaiety expired and her teeth were hidden.

"I've said nothing to mother—" Constance proceeded.

"I should hope you haven't," Sophia put in tersely.

"But I certainly shall if you don't throw that away," Constance finished.

"You can say what you like," Sophia retorted, adding contemptuously a term of opprobrium which has long since passed out of use : "Cant!"

“Will you give it me or won’t you?”

“No!”

It was a battle suddenly engaged in the bedroom. The atmosphere had altered completely with the swiftness of magic. The beauty of Sophia, the angelic tenderness of Constance, and the youthful, naïve, innocent charm of both of them, were transformed into something sinister and cruel. Sophia lay back on the pillow amid her dark-brown hair, and gazed with relentless defiance into the angry eyes of Constance, who stood threatening by the bed. They could hear the gas singing over the dressing-table, and their hearts beating the blood wildly in their veins. They ceased to be young without growing old; the eternal had leapt up in them from its sleep.

Constance walked away from the bed to the dressing-table and began to loose her hair and brush it, holding back her head, shaking it, and bending forward, in the changeless gesture of that rite. She was so disturbed that she had unconsciously reversed the customary order of the toilette. After a moment Sophia slipped out of bed and, stepping with her bare feet to the chest of drawers, opened her work-box and deposited the fragment of Mr Povey therein; she dropped the lid with an uncompromising bang, as if to say, “We shall see if I am to be trod upon, miss!” Their eyes met again in the looking-glass. Then Sophia got back into bed.

Five minutes later, when her hair was quite finished, Constance knelt down and said her prayers. Having said her prayers, she went straight to Sophia’s work-box, opened it, seized the fragment of Mr Povey, ran to the window, and frantically pushed the fragment through the slit into the square.

“There!” she exclaimed nervously.

She had accomplished this inconceivable transgression of the code of honour, beyond all undoing, before Sophia could recover from the stupefaction of seeing her sacred work-box impudently violated. In a single moment one of Sophia’s chief ideals had been smashed utterly, and that by the sweetest, gentlest creature she had ever known. It was a revealing experience for Sophia—and also for Constance. And it frightened them equally. Sophia, staring at the text, “Thou God seest me,” framed in straw over the chest of drawers, did not stir. She was defeated, and so profoundly moved in her defeat that she did not even reflect upon the obvious inefficacy of illuminated texts as a deterrent from evil-doing. Not that she cared a fig for the fragment of Mr Povey! It was the moral aspect of the affair, and the astounding, inexplicable development in Constance’s character that staggered her into silent acceptance of the inevitable.

Constance, trembling, took pains to finish undressing with dignified deliberation. Sophia’s behaviour under the blow seemed too good to be true; but it gave her courage. At length she turned out the gas and lay down by Sophia. And there was a little shuffling, and then stillness for a while.

“And if you want to know,” said Constance in a tone that mingled amicableness with righteousness, “mother’s decided with Aunt Harriet that we are *both* to leave school next term.”

CHAPTER III

A BATTLE

I

The day sanctioned by custom in the Five Towns for the making of pastry is Saturday. But Mrs Baines made her pastry on Friday, because Saturday afternoon was, of course, a busy time in the shop. It is true that Mrs Baines made her pastry in the morning, and that Saturday morning in the shop was scarcely different from any other morning. Nevertheless, Mrs Baines made her pastry on Friday morning instead of Saturday morning because Saturday afternoon was a busy time in the shop. She was thus free to do her marketing without breathtaking flurry on Saturday morning.

On the morning after Sophia’s first essay in dentistry, therefore, Mrs Baines was making her pastry in the underground kitchen. This kitchen, Maggie’s cavern-home, had the mystery of a church, and on dark days it had the mystery of a crypt. The stone steps leading down to it from the level of earth were quite unlighted. You felt for them with the feet of faith, and when you arrived in the kitchen, the kitchen, by contrast, seemed luminous and gay; the architect may have considered and intended this effect of the staircase. The kitchen saw day through a wide, shallow window whose top touched the ceiling and whose bottom had been out of the girls’ reach until long after they had begun to go to school. Its panes were small, and about half of them were of the “knot” kind, through which no object could be distinguished; the other half were of a later date,

and stood for the march of civilization. The view from the window consisted of the vast plate-glass windows of the newly built Sun vaults, and of passing legs and skirts. A strong wire grating prevented any excess of illumination, and also protected the glass from the caprices of wayfarers in King Street. Boys had a habit of stopping to kick with their full strength at the grating.

Forget-me-nots on a brown field ornamented the walls of the kitchen. Its ceiling was irregular and grimy, and a beam ran across it; in this beam were two hooks; from these hooks had once depended the ropes of a swing, much used by Constance and Sophia in the old days before they were grown up. A large range stood out from the wall between the stairs and the window. The rest of the furniture comprised a table—against the wall opposite the range—a cupboard, and two Windsor chairs. Opposite the foot of the steps was a doorway, without a door, leading to two larders, dimmer even than the kitchen, vague retreats made visible by whitewash, where bowls of milk, dishes of cold bones, and remainders of fruit-pies, reposed on stillages; in the corner nearest the kitchen was a great steen in which the bread was kept. Another doorway on the other side of the kitchen led to the first coal-cellar, where was also the slopstone and tap, and thence a tunnel took you to the second coal-cellar, where coke and ashes were stored; the tunnel proceeded to a distant, infinitesimal yard, and from the yard, by ways behind Mr Critchlow's shop, you could finally emerge, astonished, upon Brougham Street. The sense of the vast-obscure of those regions which began at the top of the kitchen steps and ended in black corners of larders or abruptly in the common dailiness of Brougham Street, a sense which Constance and Sophia had acquired in infancy, remained with them almost unimpaired as they grew old.

Mrs Baines wore black alpaca, shielded by a white apron whose string drew attention to the amplitude of her waist. Her sleeves were turned up, and her hands, as far as the knuckles, covered with damp flour. Her ageless smooth paste-board occupied a corner of the table, and near it were her paste-roller, butter, some pie-dishes, shredded apples, sugar, and other things. Those rosy hands were at work among a sticky substance in a large white bowl.

"Mother, are you there?" she heard a voice from above.

"Yes, my chuck."

Footsteps apparently reluctant and hesitating clinked on the stairs, and Sophia entered the kitchen.

"Put this curl straight," said Mrs Baines, lowering her head slightly and holding up her floured hands, which might not touch anything but flour. "Thank you. It bothered me. And now stand out of my light. I'm in a hurry. I must get into the shop so that I can send Mr Povey off to the dentist's. What is Constance doing?"

"Helping Maggie to make Mr Povey's bed."

"Oh!"

Though fat, Mrs Baines was a comely woman, with fine brown hair, and confidently calm eyes that indicated her belief in her own capacity to accomplish whatever she could be called on to accomplish. She looked neither more nor less than her age, which was forty-five. She was not a native of the district, having been culled by her husband from the moorland town of Axe, twelve miles off. Like nearly all women who settle in a strange land upon marriage, at the bottom of her heart she had considered herself just a trifle superior to the strange land and its ways. This feeling, confirmed by long experience, had never left her. It was this feeling which induced her to continue making her own pastry—with two thoroughly trained "great girls" in the house! Constance could make good pastry, but it was not her mother's pastry. In pastry-making everything can be taught except the "hand," light and firm, which wields the roller. One is born with this hand, or without it. And if one is born without it, the highest flights of pastry are impossible. Constance was born without it. There were days when Sophia seemed to possess it; but there were other days when Sophia's pastry was uneatable by any one except Maggie. Thus Mrs Baines, though intensely proud and fond of her daughters, had justifiably preserved a certain condescension towards them. She honestly doubted whether either of them would develop into the equal of their mother.

"Now you little vixen!" she exclaimed. Sophia was stealing and eating slices of half-cooked apple. "This comes of having no breakfast! And why didn't you come down to supper last night?"

"I don't know. I forgot."

Mrs Baines scrutinized the child's eyes, which met hers with a sort of diffident boldness. She knew everything that a mother can know of a daughter, and she was sure that Sophia had no cause to be indisposed. Therefore she scrutinized those eyes with a faint apprehension.

"If you can't find anything better to do," said she, "butter me the inside of this dish. Are your hands clean? No, better not touch it."

Mrs Baines was now at the stage of depositing little pats of butter in rows on a large plain of paste. The best fresh butter! Cooking butter, to say naught of lard, was unknown in that kitchen on Friday mornings. She doubled the expanse of paste on itself and rolled the butter in—supreme operation!

"Constance has told you about leaving school?" said Mrs Baines, in the vein of small-talk, as she trimmed the paste to the shape of a pie-dish.

"Yes," Sophia replied shortly. Then she moved away from the table to the range. There was a toasting-fork on the rack, and she began to play with it.

"Well, are you glad? Your aunt Harriet thinks you are quite old enough to leave. And as we'd decided in

any case that Constance was to leave, it's really much simpler that you should both leave together."

"Mother," said Sophia, rattling the toasting-fork, "what am I going to do after I've left school?"

"I hope," Mrs Baines answered with that sententiousness which even the cleverest of parents are not always clever enough to deny themselves, "I hope that both of you will do what you can to help your mother—and father," she added.

"Yes," said Sophia, irritated. "But what am I going to *do*?"

"That must be considered. As Constance is to learn the millinery, I've been thinking that you might begin to make yourself useful in the underwear, gloves, silks, and so on. Then between you, you would one day be able to manage quite nicely all that side of the shop, and I should be—"

"I don't want to go into the shop, mother."

This interruption was made in a voice apparently cold and inimical. But Sophia trembled with nervous excitement as she uttered the words. Mrs Baines gave a brief glance at her, unobserved by the child, whose face was towards the fire. She deemed herself a finished expert in the reading of Sophia's moods; nevertheless, as she looked at that straight back and proud head, she had no suspicion that the whole essence and being of Sophia was silently but intensely imploring sympathy.

"I wish you would be quiet with that fork," said Mrs Baines, with the curious, grim politeness which often characterized her relations with her daughters.

The toasting-fork fell on the brick floor, after having rebounded from the ash-tin. Sophia hurriedly replaced it on the rack.

"Then what *shall* you do?" Mrs Baines proceeded, conquering the annoyance caused by the toasting-fork. "I think it's me that should ask you instead of you asking me. What shall you do? Your father and I were both hoping you would take kindly to the shop and try to repay us for all the—"

Mrs Baines was unfortunate in her phrasing that morning. She happened to be, in truth, rather an exceptional parent, but that morning she seemed unable to avoid the absurd pretensions which parents of those days assumed quite sincerely and which every good child with meekness accepted.

Sophia was not a good child, and she obstinately denied in her heart the cardinal principle of family life, namely, that the parent has conferred on the offspring a supreme favour by bringing it into the world. She interrupted her mother again, rudely.

"I don't want to leave school at all," she said passionately.

"But you will have to leave school sooner or later," argued Mrs Baines, with an air of quiet reasoning, of putting herself on a level with Sophia. "You can't stay at school for ever, my pet, can you? Out of my way!"

She hurried across the kitchen with a pie, which she whipped into the oven, shutting the iron door with a careful gesture.

"Yes," said Sophia. "I should like to be a teacher. That's what I want to be."

The tap in the coal-cellar, out of repair, could be heard distinctly and systematically dropping water into a jar on the slopstone.

"A school-teacher?" inquired Mrs Baines.

"Of course. What other kind is there?" said Sophia, sharply. "With Miss Chetwynd."

"I don't think your father would like that," Mrs Baines replied. "I'm sure he wouldn't like it."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be quite suitable."

"Why not, mother?" the girl demanded with a sort of ferocity. She had now quitted the range. A man's feet twinkled past the window.

Mrs Baines was startled and surprised. Sophia's attitude was really very trying; her manners deserved correction. But it was not these phenomena which seriously affected Mrs Baines; she was used to them and had come to regard them as somehow the inevitable accompaniment of Sophia's beauty, as the penalty of that surpassing charm which occasionally emanated from the girl like a radiance. What startled and surprised Mrs Baines was the perfect and unthinkable madness of Sophia's infantile scheme. It was a revelation to Mrs Baines. Why in the name of heaven had the girl taken such a notion into her head? Orphans, widows, and spinsters of a certain age suddenly thrown on the world—these were the women who, naturally, became teachers, because they had to become something. But that the daughter of comfortable parents, surrounded by love and the pleasures of an excellent home, should wish to teach in a school was beyond the horizons of Mrs Baines's common sense. Comfortable parents of today who have a difficulty in sympathizing with Mrs Baines, should picture what their feelings would be if their Sophias showed a rude desire to adopt the vocation of chauffeur.

"It would take you too much away from home," said Mrs Baines, achieving a second pie.

She spoke softly. The experience of being Sophia's mother for nearly sixteen years had not been lost on Mrs Baines, and though she was now discovering undreamt-of dangers in Sophia's erratic temperament, she kept her presence of mind sufficiently well to behave with diplomatic smoothness. It was undoubtedly humiliating to a mother to be forced to use diplomacy in dealing with a girl in short sleeves. In *her* day mothers had been autocrats. But Sophia was Sophia.

"What if it did?" Sophia curtly demanded.

“And there’s no opening in Bursley,” said Mrs Baines.

“Miss Chetwynd would have me, and then after a time I could go to her sister.”

“Her sister? What sister?”

“Her sister that has a big school in London somewhere.”

Mrs Baines covered her unprecedented emotions by gazing into the oven at the first pie. The pie was doing well, under all the circumstances. In those few seconds she reflected rapidly and decided that to a desperate disease a desperate remedy must be applied.

London! She herself had never been farther than Manchester. London, “after a time”! No, diplomacy would be misplaced in this crisis of Sophia’s development!

“Sophia,” she said, in a changed and solemn voice, fronting her daughter, and holding away from her apron those floured, ringed hands, “I don’t know what has come over you. Truly I don’t! Your father and I are prepared to put up with a certain amount, but the line must be drawn. The fact is, we’ve spoilt you, and instead of getting better as you grow up, you’re getting worse. Now let me hear no more of this, please. I wish you would imitate your sister a little more. Of course if you won’t do your share in the shop, no one can make you. If you choose to be an idler about the house, we shall have to endure it. We can only advise you for your own good. But as for this . . .” She stopped, and let silence speak, and then finished: “Let me hear no more of it.”

It was a powerful and impressive speech enunciated clearly in such a tone as Mrs Baines had not employed since dismissing a young lady assistant five years ago for light conduct.

“But, mother—”

A commotion of pails resounded at the top of the stone steps. It was Maggie in descent from the bedrooms. Now, the Baines family passed its life in doing its best to keep its affairs to itself, the assumption being that Maggie and all the shop-staff (Mr Povey possibly excepted) were obsessed by a ravening appetite for that which did not concern them. Therefore the voices of the Baineses always died away or fell to a hushed, mysterious whisper whenever the foot of the eavesdropper was heard.

Mrs Baines put a floured finger to her double chin. “That will do,” said she, with finality.

Maggie appeared, and Sophia, with a brusque precipitation of herself, vanished upstairs.

II

“Now, really, Mr Povey, this is not like you,” said Mrs Baines, who, on her way into the shop, had discovered the Indispensable in the cutting-out room.

It is true that the cutting-out room was almost Mr Povey’s sanctum, whither he retired from time to time to cut out suits of clothes and odd garments for the tailoring department. It is true that the tailoring department flourished with orders, employing several tailors who crossed legs in their own homes, and that appointments were continually being made with customers for trying-on in that room. But these considerations did not affect Mrs Baines’s attitude of disapproval.

“I’m just cutting out that suit for the minister,” said Mr Povey.

The Reverend Mr Murley, superintendent of the Wesleyan Methodist circuit, called on Mr Baines every week. On a recent visit Mr Baines had remarked that the parson’s coat was ageing into green, and had commanded that a new suit should be built and presented to Mr Murley. Mr Murley, who had a genuine medieval passion for souls, and who spent his money and health freely in gratifying the passion, had accepted the offer strictly on behalf of Christ, and had carefully explained to Mr Povey Christ’s use for multifarious pockets.

“I see you are,” said Mrs Baines tartly. “But that’s no reason why you should be without a coat—and in this cold room too. You with toothache!”

The fact was that Mr Povey always doffed his coat when cutting out. Instead of a coat he wore a tape-measure.

“My tooth doesn’t hurt me,” said he, sheepishly, dropping the great scissors and picking up a cake of chalk.

“Fiddlesticks!” said Mrs Baines.

This exclamation shocked Mr Povey. It was not unknown on the lips of Mrs Baines, but she usually reserved it for members of her own sex. Mr Povey could not recall that she had ever applied it to any statement of his. “What’s the matter with the woman?” he thought. The redness of her face did not help him to answer the question, for her face was always red after the operations of Friday in the kitchen.

“You men are all alike,” Mrs Baines continued. “The very thought of the dentist’s cures you. Why don’t you go in at once to Mr Critchlow and have it out—like a man?”

Mr Critchlow extracted teeth, and his shop sign said “Bonesetter and chemist.” But Mr Povey had his views.

“I make no account of Mr Critchlow as a dentist,” said he.

“Then for goodness’ sake go up to Oulsnam’s.”

“When? I can’t very well go now, and tomorrow is Saturday.”

“Why can’t you go now?”

“Well, of course, I *could* go now,” he admitted.

“Let me advise you to go, then, and don’t come back with that tooth in your head. I shall be having you laid up next. Show some pluck, do!”

“Oh! pluck—!” he protested, hurt.

At that moment Constance came down the passage singing.

“Constance, my pet!” Mrs Baines called.

“Yes, mother.” She put her head into the room. “Oh!” Mr Povey was assuming his coat.

“Mr Povey is going to the dentist’s.”

“Yes, I’m going at once,” Mr Povey confirmed.

“Oh! I’m so *glad*!” Constance exclaimed. Her face expressed a pure sympathy, uncomplicated by critical sentiments. Mr Povey rapidly bathed in that sympathy, and then decided that he must show himself a man of oak and iron.

“It’s always best to get these things done with,” said he, with stern detachment. “I’ll just slip my overcoat on.”

“Here it is,” said Constance, quickly. Mr Povey’s overcoat and hat were hung on a hook immediately outside the room, in the passage. She gave him the overcoat, anxious to be of service.

“I didn’t call you in here to be Mr Povey’s valet,” said Mrs Baines to herself with mild grimness; and aloud: “I can’t stay in the shop long, Constance, but you can be there, can’t you, till Mr Povey comes back? And if anything happens run upstairs and tell me.”

“Yes, mother,” Constance eagerly consented. She hesitated and then turned to obey at once.

“I want to speak to you first, my pet,” Mrs Baines stopped her. And her tone was peculiar, charged with import, confidential, and therefore very flattering to Constance.

“I think I’ll go out by the side-door,” said Mr Povey. “It’ll be nearer.”

This was truth. He would save about ten yards, in two miles, by going out through the side-door instead of through the shop. Who could have guessed that he was ashamed to be seen going to the dentist’s, afraid lest, if he went through the shop, Mrs Baines might follow him and utter some remark prejudicial to his dignity before the assistants? (Mrs Baines could have guessed, and did.)

“You won’t want that tape-measure,” said Mrs Baines, dryly, as Mr Povey dragged open the side-door. The ends of the forgotten tape-measure were dangling beneath coat and overcoat.

“Oh!” Mr Povey scowled at his forgetfulness.

“I’ll put it in its place,” said Constance, offering to receive the tape-measure.

“Thank you,” said Mr Povey, gravely. “I don’t suppose they’ll be long over my bit of a job,” he added, with a difficult, miserable smile.

Then he went off down King Street, with an exterior of gay briskness and dignified joy in the fine May morning. But there was no May morning in his cowardly human heart.

“Hi! Povey!” cried a voice from the Square.

But Mr Povey disregarded all appeals. He had put his hand to the plough, and he would not look back.

“Hi! Povey!’

Useless!

Mrs Baines and Constance were both at the door. A middle-aged man was crossing the road from Boulton Terrace, the lofty erection of new shops which the envious rest of the Square had decided to call “showy.” He waved a hand to Mrs Baines, who kept the door open.

“It’s Dr Harrop,” she said to Constance. “I shouldn’t be surprised if that baby’s come at last, and he wanted to tell Mr Povey.”

Constance blushed, full of pride. Mrs Povey, wife of “our Mr Povey’s” renowned cousin, the high-class confectioner and baker in Boulton Terrace, was a frequent subject of discussion in the Baines family, but this was absolutely the first time that Mrs Baines had acknowledged, in presence of Constance, the marked and growing change which had characterized Mrs Povey’s condition during recent months. Such frankness on the part of her mother, coming after the decision about leaving school, proved indeed that Constance had ceased to be a mere girl.

“Good morning, doctor.”

The doctor, who carried a little bag and wore tiding-breeches (he was the last doctor in Bursley to abandon the saddle for the dog-cart), saluted and straightened his high, black stock.

“Morning! Morning, missy! Well, it’s a boy.”

“What? Yonder?” asked Mrs Baines, indicating the confectioner’s.

Dr Harrop nodded. “I wanted to inform him,” said he, jerking his shoulder in the direction of the swaggering coward.

“What did I tell you, Constance?” said Mrs Baines, turning to her daughter.

Constance’s confusion was equal to her pleasure. The alert doctor had halted at the foot of the two steps, and with one hand in the pocket of his “full-fall” breeches, he gazed up, smiling, out of little eyes, at the ample matron and the slender virgin.

“Yes,” he said. “Been up most of th’ night. Difficult! Difficult!”

“It’s all *right*, I hope?”

“Oh yes. Fine child! Fine child! But he put his mother to some trouble, for all that. Nothing fresh?” This time he lifted his eyes to indicate Mr Baines’s bedroom.

“No,” said Mrs Baines, with a different expression.

“Keeps cheerful?”

“Yes.”

“Good! A very good morning to you.”

He strode off towards his house, which was lower down the street.

“I hope she’ll turn over a new leaf now,” observed Mrs Baines to Constance as she closed the door. Constance knew that her mother was referring to the confectioner’s wife; she gathered that the hope was slight in the extreme.

“What did you want to speak to me about, mother?” she asked, as a way out of her delicious confusion.

“Shut that door,” Mrs Baines replied, pointing to the door which led to the passage; and while Constance obeyed, Mrs Baines herself shut the staircase-door. She then said, in a low, guarded voice:

“What’s all this about Sophia wanting to be a school-teacher?”

“Wanting to be a school-teacher?” Constance repeated, in tones of amazement.

“Yes. Hasn’t she said anything to you?”

“Not a word!”

“Well, I never! She wants to keep on with Miss Chetwynd and be a teacher.” Mrs Baines had half a mind to add that Sophia had mentioned London. But she restrained herself. There are some things which one cannot bring one’s self to say. She added, “Instead of going into the shop!”

“I never heard of such a thing!” Constance murmured brokenly, in the excess of her astonishment. She was rolling up Mr Povey’s tape-measure.

“Neither did I!” said Mrs Baines.

“And shall you let her, mother?”

“Neither your father nor I would ever dream of it!” Mrs Baines replied, with calm and yet terrible decision. “I only mentioned it to you because I thought Sophia would have told you something.”

“No, mother!”

As Constance put Mr Povey’s tape-measure neatly away in its drawer under the cutting-out counter, she thought how serious life was—what with babies and Sophias. She was very proud of her mother’s confidence in her; this simple pride filled her ardent breast with a most agreeable commotion. And she wanted to help everybody, to show in some way how much she sympathized with and loved everybody. Even the madness of Sophia did not weaken her longing to comfort Sophia.

III

That afternoon there was a search for Sophia, whom no one had seen since dinner. She was discovered by her mother, sitting alone and unoccupied in the drawing-room. The circumstance was in itself sufficiently peculiar, for on weekdays the drawing-room was never used, even by the girls during their holidays, except for the purpose of playing the piano. However, Mrs Baines offered no comment on Sophia’s geographical situation, nor on her idleness.

“My dear,” she said, standing at the door, with a self-conscious effort to behave as though nothing had happened, “will you come and sit with your father a bit?”

“Yes, mother,” answered Sophia, with a sort of cold alacrity.

“Sophia is coming, father,” said Mrs Baines at the open door of the bedroom, which was at right-angles with, and close to, the drawing-room door. Then she surged swishing along the corridor and went into the showroom, whither she had been called.

Sophia passed to the bedroom, the eternal prison of John Baines. Although, on account of his nervous restlessness, Mr Baines was never left alone, it was not a part of the usual duty of the girls to sit with him. The person who undertook the main portion of the vigils was a certain Aunt Maria—whom the girls knew to be not a real aunt, not a powerful, effective aunt like Aunt Harriet of Axe—but a poor second cousin of John Baines; one of those necessitous, pitiful relatives who so often make life difficult for a great family in a small town. The existence of Aunt Maria, after being rather a “trial” to the Baineses, had for twelve years past developed into something absolutely “providential” for them. (It is to be remembered that in those days Providence was still busying himself with everybody’s affairs, and foreseeing the future in the most extraordinary manner. Thus, having foreseen that John Baines would have a “stroke” and need a faithful, tireless nurse, he had begun fifty years in advance by creating Aunt Maria, and had kept her carefully in misfortune’s way, so that at the proper moment she would be ready to cope with the stroke. Such at least is the only theory which will explain the use by the Baineses, and indeed by all thinking Bursley, of the word “providential” in connexion with Aunt Maria.) She was a shrivelled little woman, capable of sitting twelve hours a day in a bedroom and thriving on the *régime*. At nights she went home to her little cottage in Brougham Street; she had her Thursday afternoons and generally her Sundays, and during the school vacations she was supposed to come only when she felt inclined, or when the cleaning of her cottage

permitted her to come. Hence, in holiday seasons, Mr Baines weighed more heavily on his household than at other times, and his nurses relieved each other according to the contingencies of the moment rather than by a set programme of hours.

The tragedy in ten thousand acts of which that bedroom was the scene, almost entirely escaped Sophia's perception, as it did Constance's. Sophia went into the bedroom as though it were a mere bedroom, with its majestic mahogany furniture, its crimson rep curtains (edged with gold), and its white, heavily tasselled counterpane. She was aged four when John Baines had suddenly been seized with giddiness on the steps of his shop, and had fallen, and, without losing consciousness, had been transformed from John Baines into a curious and pathetic survival of John Baines. She had no notion of the thrill which ran through the town on that night when it was known that John Baines had had a stroke, and that his left arm and left leg and his right eyelid were paralyzed, and that the active member of the Local Board, the orator, the religious worker, the very life of the town's life, was permanently done for. She had never heard of the crisis through which her mother, assisted by Aunt Harriet, had passed, and out of which she had triumphantly emerged. She was not yet old enough even to suspect it. She possessed only the vaguest memory of her father before he had finished with the world. She knew him simply as an organism on a bed, whose left side was wasted, whose eyes were often inflamed, whose mouth was crooked, who had no creases from the nose to the corners of the mouth like other people, who experienced difficulty in eating because the food would somehow get between his gums and his cheek, who slept a great deal but was excessively fidgety while awake, who seemed to hear what was said to him a long time after it was uttered, as if the sense had to travel miles by labyrinthine passages to his brain, and who talked very, very slowly in a weak, trembling voice.

And she had an image of that remote brain as something with a red spot on it, for once Constance had said: "Mother, why did father have a stroke?" and Mrs Baines had replied: "It was a haemorrhage of the brain, my dear, here"—putting a thimbled finger on a particular part of Sophia's head.

Not merely had Constance and Sophia never really felt their father's tragedy; Mrs Baines herself had largely lost the sense of it—such is the effect of use. Even the ruined organism only remembered fitfully and partially that it had once been John Baines. And if Mrs Baines had not, by the habit of years, gradually built up a gigantic fiction that the organism remained ever the supreme consultative head of the family; if Mr Critchlow had not obstinately continued to treat it as a crony, the mass of living and dead nerves on the rich Victorian bedstead would have been of no more account than some Aunt Maria in similar case. These two persons, his wife and his friend, just managed to keep him morally alive by indefatigably feeding his importance and his dignity. The feat was a miracle of stubborn, self-deceiving, splendidly blind devotion, and incorrigible pride.

When Sophia entered the room, the paralytic followed her with his nervous gaze until she had sat down on the end of the sofa at the foot of the bed. He seemed to study her for a long time, and then he murmured in his slow, enfeebled, irregular voice:

"Is that Sophia?"

"Yes, father," she answered cheerfully.

And after another pause, the old man said: "Ay! It's Sophia."

And later: "Your mother said she should send ye."

Sophia saw that this was one of his bad, dull days. He had, occasionally, days of comparative nimbleness, when his wits seized almost easily the meanings of external phenomena.

Presently his sallow face and long white beard began to slip down the steep slant of the pillows, and a troubled look came into his left eye. Sophia rose, and, putting her hands under his armpits, lifted him higher on the bed. He was not heavy, but only a strong girl of her years could have done it.

"Ay!" he muttered. "That's it. That's it."

And, with his controllable right hand, he took her hand as she stood by the bed. She was so young and fresh, such an incarnation of the spirit of health, and he was so far gone in decay and corruption, that there seemed in this contact of body with body something unnatural and repulsive. But Sophia did not so feel it.

"Sophia," he addressed her, and made preparatory noises in his throat while she waited.

He continued after an interval, now clutching her arm, "Your mother's been telling me you don't want to go in the shop."

She turned her eyes on him, and his anxious, dim gaze met hers. She nodded.

"Nay, Sophia," he mumbled, with the extreme of slowness. "I'm surprised at ye . . . Trade's bad, bad! Ye know trade's bad?" He was still clutching her arm.

She nodded. She was, in fact, aware of the badness of trade, caused by a vague war in the United States. The words "North" and "South" had a habit of recurring in the conversation of adult persons. That was all she knew, though people were starving in the Five Towns as they were starving in Manchester.

"There's your mother," his thought struggled on, like an aged horse over a hilly road. "There's your mother!" he repeated, as if wishful to direct Sophia's attention to the spectacle of her mother. "Working hard! Con—Constance and you must help her . . . Trade's bad! What can I do . . . lying here?"

The heat from his dry fingers was warming her arm. She wanted to move, but she could hot have withdrawn her arm without appearing impatient. For a similar reason she would not avert her glance. A deepening flush increased the lustre of her immature loveliness as she bent over him. But though it was so

close he did not feel that radiance. He had long outlived a susceptibility to the strange influences of youth and beauty.

"Teaching!" he muttered. "Nay, nay! I canna' allow that."

Then his white beard rose at the tip as he looked up at the ceiling above his head, reflectively.

"You understand me?" he questioned finally.

She nodded again; he loosed her arm, and she turned away. She could not have spoken. Glittering tears enriched her eyes. She was saddened into a profound and sudden grief by the ridiculousness of the scene. She had youth, physical perfection; she brimmed with energy, with the sense of vital power; all existence lay before her; when she put her lips together she felt capable of outvying no matter whom in fortitude of resolution. She had always hated the shop. She did not understand how her mother and Constance could bring themselves to be deferential and flattering to every customer that entered. No, she did not understand it; but her mother (though a proud woman) and Constance seemed to practise such behaviour so naturally, so unquestionably, that she had never imparted to either of them her feelings; she guessed that she would not be comprehended. But long ago she had decided that she would never "go into the shop." She knew that she would be expected to do something, and she had fixed on teaching as the one possibility. These decisions had formed part of her inner life for years past. She had not mentioned them, being secretive and scarcely anxious for unpleasantness. But she had been slowly preparing herself to mention them. The extraordinary announcement that she was to leave school at the same time as Constance had taken her unawares, before the preparations ripening in her mind were complete—before, as it were, she had girded up her loins for the fray. She had been caught unready, and the opposing forces had obtained the advantage of her. But did they suppose she was beaten?

No argument from her mother! No hearing, even! Just a curt and haughty "Let me hear no more of it"! And so the great desire of her life, nourished year after year in her inmost bosom, was to be flouted and sacrificed with a word! Her mother did not appear ridiculous in the affair, for her mother was a genuine power, commanding by turns genuine love and genuine hate, and always, till then, obedience and the respect of reason. It was her father who appeared tragically ridiculous; and, in turn, the whole movement against her grew grotesque in its absurdity. Here was this antique wreck, helpless, useless, powerless—merely pathetic—actually thinking that he had only to mumble in order to make her "understand"! He knew nothing; he perceived nothing; he was a ferocious egoist, like most bedridden invalids, out of touch with life—and he thought himself justified in making destinies, and capable of making them! Sophia could not, perhaps, define the feelings which overwhelmed her; but she was conscious of their tendency. They aged her, by years. They aged her so that, in a kind of momentary ecstasy of insight, she felt older than her father himself.

"You will be a good girl," he said. "I'm sure o' that."

It was too painful. The grotesqueness of her father's complacency humiliated her past bearing. She was humiliated, not for herself, but for him. Singular creature! She ran out of the room.

Fortunately Constance was passing in the corridor, otherwise Sophia had been found guilty of a great breach of duty.

"Go to father," she whispered hysterically to Constance, and fled upwards to the second floor.

IV

At supper, with her red, downcast eyes, she had returned to sheer girlishness again, overawed by her mother. The meal had an unustial aspect. Mr Povey, safe from the dentist's, but having lost two teeth in two days, was being fed on "slops"—bread and milk, to wit; he sat near the fire. The others had cold pork, half a cold apple-pie, and cheese; but Sophia only pretended to eat; each time she tried to swallow, the tears came into her eyes, and her throat shut itself up. Mrs Baines and Constance had a too careful air of eating just as usual. Mrs Baines's handsome ringlets dominated the table under the gas.

"I'm not so set up with my pastry today," observed Mrs Baines, critically munching a fragment of pie-crust.

She rang a little hand-bell. Maggie appeared from the cave. She wore a plain white bib-less apron, but no cap.

"Maggie, will you have some pie?"

"Yes, if you can spare it, ma'am."

This was Maggie's customary answer to offers of food.

"We can always spare it, Maggie," said her mistress, as usual. "Sophia, if you aren't going to use that plate, give it to me."

Maggie disappeared with liberal pie.

Mrs Baines then talked to Mr Povey about his condition, and in particular as to the need for precautions against taking cold in the bereaved gum. She was a brave and determined woman; from start to finish she behaved as though nothing whatever in the household except her pastry and Mr Povey had deviated that day from the normal. She kissed Constance and Sophia with the most exact equality, and called them "my chucks" when they went up to bed.

Constance, excellent kind heart, tried to imitate her mother's tactics as the girls undressed in their room.

She thought she could not do better than ignore Sophia's deplorable state.

"Mother's new dress is quite finished, and she's going to wear it on Sunday," said she, blandly.

"If you say another word I'll scratch your eyes out!" Sophia turned on her viciously, with a catch in her voice, and then began to sob at intervals. She did not mean this threat, but its utterance gave her relief. Constance, faced with the fact that her mother's shoes were too big for her, decided to preserve her eyesight.

Long after the gas was out, rare sobs from Sophia shook the bed, and they both lay awake in silence.

"I suppose you and mother have been talking me over finely today?" Sophia burst forth, to Constance's surprise, in a wet voice.

"No," said Constance soothingly. "Mother only told me."

"Told you what?"

"That you wanted to be a teacher."

"And I will be, too!" said Sophia, bitterly.

"You don't know mother," thought Constance; but she made no audible comment.

There was another detached, hard sob. And then, such is the astonishing talent of youth, they both fell asleep.

The next morning, early, Sophia stood gazing out of the window at the Square. It was Saturday, and all over the Square little stalls, with yellow linen roofs, were being erected for the principal market of the week. In those barbaric days Bursley had a majestic edifice, black as basalt, for the sale of dead animals by the limb and rib—it was entitled "the Shambles"—but vegetables, fruit, cheese, eggs, and pikelets were still sold under canvas. Eggs are now offered at five farthings apiece in a palace that cost twenty-five thousand pounds. Yet you will find people in Bursley ready to assert that things generally are not what they were, and that in particular the romance of life has gone. But until it has gone it is never romance. To Sophia, though she was in a mood which usually stimulates the sense of the romantic, there was nothing of romance in this picturesque tented field. It was just the market. Holl's, the leading grocer's, was already open, at the extremity of the Square, and a boy apprentice was sweeping the pavement in front of it. The public-houses were open, several of them specializing in hot rum at 5.30 A.M. The town-crier, in his blue coat with red facings, crossed the Square, carrying his big bell by the tongue. There was the same shocking hole in one of Mrs Povey's (confectioner's) window-curtains—a hole which even her recent travail could scarcely excuse. Such matters it was that Sophia noticed with dull, smarting eyes.

"Sophia, you'll take your death of cold standing there like that!"

She jumped. The voice was her mother's. That vigorous woman, after a calm night by the side of the paralytic, was already up and neatly dressed. She carried a bottle and an egg-cup, and a small quantity of jam in a table-spoon.

"Get into bed again, do! There's a dear! You're shivering."

White Sophia obeyed. It was true; she was shivering. Constance awoke. Mrs Baines went to the dressing-table and filled the egg-cup out of the bottle.

"Who's that for, mother?" Constance asked sleepily.

"It's for Sophia," said Mrs Baines, with good cheer. "Now, Sophia!" and she advanced with the egg-cup in one hand and the table-spoon in the other.

"What is it, mother?" asked Sophia, who well knew what it was.

"Castor-oil, my dear," said Mrs Baines, winningly.

The ludicrousness of attempting to cure obstinacy and yearnings for a freer life by means of castor-oil is perhaps less real than apparent. The strange interdependence of spirit and body, though only understood intelligently in these intelligent days, was guessed at by sensible medieval mothers. And certainly, at the period when Mrs Baines represented modernity, castor-oil was still the remedy of remedies. It had supplanted cupping. And, if part of its vogue was due to its extreme unpleasantness, it had at least proved its qualities in many a contest with disease. Less than two years previously old Dr Harrop (father of him who told Mrs Baines about Mrs Povey), being then aged eighty-six, had fallen from top to bottom of his staircase. He had scrambled up, taken a dose of castor-oil at once, and on the morrow was as well as if he had never seen a staircase. This episode was town property and had sunk deep into all hearts.

"I don't want any, mother," said Sophia, in dejection. "I'm quite well."

"You simply ate nothing all day yesterday," said Mrs Baines. And she added, "Come!" As if to say, "There's always this silly fuss with castor-oil. Don't keep me waiting."

"I don't *want* any," said Sophia, irritated and captious.

The two girls lay side by side, on their backs. They seemed very thin and fragile in comparison with the solidity of their mother. Constance wisely held her peace.

Mrs Baines put her lips together, meaning: "This is becoming tedious. I shall have to be angry in another moment!"

"Come!" said she again.

The girls could hear her foot tapping on the floor.

"I really don't want it, mamma," Sophia fought. "I suppose I ought to know whether I need it or not!" This was insolence.

“Sophia, will you take this medicine, or won’t you?”

In conflicts with her children, the mother’s ultimatum always took the formula in which this phrase was cast. The girls knew, when things had arrived at the pitch of “or won’t you,” spoken in Mrs Baines’s firmest tone, that the end was upon them. Never had the ultimatum failed.

There was a silence.

“And I’ll thank you to mind your manners,” Mrs Baines added.

“I won’t take it,” said Sophia, sullenly and flatly; and she hid her face in the pillow.

It was a historic moment in the family life. Mrs Baines thought the last day had come. But still she held herself in dignity while the apocalypse roared in her ears.

“*Of course I can’t force you to take it*,” she said with superb evenness, masking anger by compassionate grief. “You’re a big girl and a naughty girl. And if you will be ill you must.”

Upon this immense admission, Mrs Baines departed.

Constance trembled.

Nor was that all. In the middle of the morning, when Mrs Baines was pricing new potatoes at a stall at the top end of the Square, and Constance choosing threepennyworth of flowers at the same stall, whom should they both see, walking all alone across the empty corner by the Bank, but Sophia Baines! The Square was busy and populous, and Sophia was only visible behind a foreground of restless, chattering figures. But she was unmistakably seen. She had been beyond the Square and was returning. Constance could scarcely believe her eyes. Mrs Baines’s heart jumped. For let it be said that the girls never under any circumstances went forth without permission, and scarcely ever alone. That Sophia should be at large in the town, without leave, without notice, exactly as if she were her own mistress, was a proposition which a day earlier had been inconceivable. Yet there she was, and moving with a leisureliness that must be described as effrontery!

Red with apprehension, Constance wondered what would happen. Mrs Baines said nought of her feelings, did not even indicate that she had seen the scandalous, the breath-taking sight. And they descended the Square laden with the lighter portions of what they had bought during an hour of buying. They went into the house by the King Street door; and the first thing they heard was the sound of the piano upstairs. Nothing happened. Mr Povey had his dinner alone; then the table was laid for them, and the bell rung, and Sophia came insolently downstairs to join her mother and sister. And nothing happened. The dinner was silently eaten, and Constance having rendered thanks to God, Sophia rose abruptly to go.

“Sophia!”

“Yes, mother.”

“Constance, stay where you are,” said Mrs Baines suddenly to Constance, who had meant to flee. Constance was therefore destined to be present at the happening, doubtless in order to emphasize its importance and seriousness.

“Sophia,” Mrs Baines resumed to her younger daughter in an ominous voice. “No, please shut the door. There is no reason why everybody in the house should hear. Come right into the room—right in! That’s it. Now, what were you doing out in the town this morning?”

Sophia was fidgeting nervously with the edge of her little black apron, and worrying a seam of the carpet with her toes. She bent her head towards her left shoulder, at first smiling vaguely. She said nothing, but every limb, every glance, every curve was speaking. Mrs Baines sat firmly in her own rocking-chair, full of the sensation that she had Sophia, as it were, writhing on the end of a skewer. Constance was braced into a moveless anguish.

“I will have an answer,” pursued Mrs Baines. “What were you doing out in the town this morning?”

“I just went out,” answered Sophia at length, still with eyes downcast, and in a rather simpering tone.

“Why did you go out? You said nothing to me about going out. I heard Constance ask you if you were coming with us to the market, and you said, very rudely, that you weren’t.”

“I didn’t say it rudely,” Sophia objected.

“Yes you did. And I’ll thank you not to answer back.”

“I didn’t mean to say it rudely, did I, Constance?” Sophia’s head turned sharply to her sister. Constance knew not where to look.

“Don’t answer back,” Mrs Baines repeated sternly. “And don’t try to drag Constance into this, for I won’t have it.”

“Oh, of course Constance is always right!” observed Sophia, with an irony whose unparalleled impudence shook Mrs Baines to her massive foundations.

“Do you want me to have to smack you, child?”

Her temper flashed out and you could see ringlets vibrating under the provocation of Sophia’s sauciness. Then Sophia’s lower lip began to fall and to bulge outwards, and all the muscles of her face seemed to slacken.

“You are a very naughty girl,” said Mrs Baines, with restraint. (“I’ve got her,” said Mrs Baines to herself. “I may just as well keep my temper.”)

And a sob broke out of Sophia. She was behaving like a little child. She bore no trace of the young maiden sedately crossing the Square without leave and without an escort.

("I knew she was going to cry," said Mrs Baines, breathing relief.)

"I'm waiting," said Mrs Baines aloud.

A second sob. Mrs Baines manufactured patience to meet the demand.

"You tell me not to answer back, and then you say you're waiting," Sophia blubbered thickly.

"What's that you say? How can I tell what you say if you talk like that?" (But Mrs Baines failed to hear out of discretion, which is better than valour.)

"It's of no consequence," Sophia blurted forth in a sob. She was weeping now, and tears were ricocheting off her lovely crimson cheeks on to the carpet; her whole body was trembling.

"Don't be a great baby," Mrs Baines enjoined, with a touch of rough persuasiveness in her voice.

"It's you who make me cry," said Sophia, bitterly. "You make me cry and then you call me a great baby!" And sobs ran through her frame like waves one after another. She spoke so indistinctly that her mother now really had some difficulty in catching her words.

"Sophia," said Mrs Baines, with god-like calm, "it is not I who make you cry. It is your guilty conscience makes you cry. I have merely asked you a question, and I intend to have an answer."

"I've told you." Here Sophia checked the sobs with an immense effort.

"What have you told me?"

"I just went out."

"I will have no trifling," said Mrs Baines. "What did you go out for, and without telling me? If you had told me afterwards, when I came in, of your own accord, it might have been different. But no, not a word! It is I who have to ask! Now, quick! I can't wait any longer."

("I gave way over the castor-oil, my girl," Mrs Baines said in her own breast. "But not again! Not again!")

"I don't know," Sophia murmured.

"What do you mean—you don't know?"

The sobbing recommenced tempestuously. "I mean I don't know. I just went out." Her voice rose; it was noisy, but scarcely articulate. "What if I did go out?"

"Sophia, I am not going to be talked to like this. If you think because you're leaving school you can do exactly as you like—"

"Do I want to leave school?" yelled Sophia, stamping. In a moment a hurricane of emotion overwhelmed her, as though that stamping of the foot had released the demons of the storm. Her face was transfigured by uncontrollable passion. "You all want to make me miserable!" she shrieked with terrible violence. "And now I can't even go out! You are a horrid, cruel woman, and I hate you! And you can do what you like! Put me in prison if you like! I know you'd be glad if I was dead!"

She dashed from the room, banging the door with a shock that made the house rattle. And she had shouted so loud that she might have been heard in the shop, and even in the kitchen. It was a startling experience for Mrs Baines. Mrs Baines, why did you saddle yourself with a witness? Why did you so positively say that you had intended to have an answer?

"Really," she stammered, pulling her dignity about her shoulders like a garment that the wind had snatched off, "I never dreamed that poor girl had such a dreadful temper! What a pity it is, for her *own* sake!" It was the best she could do.

Constance, who could not bear to witness her mother's humiliation, vanished very quietly from the room. She got half-way upstairs to the second floor, and then, hearing the loud, rapid, painful, regular intake of sobbing breaths, she hesitated and crept down again.

This was Mrs Baines's first costly experience of the child thankless for having been brought into the world. It robbed her of her profound, absolute belief in herself. She had thought she knew everything in her house and could do everything there. And lo! she had suddenly stumbled against an unsuspected personality at large in her house, a sort of hard marble affair that informed her by means of bumps that if she did not want to be hurt she must keep out of the way.

V

On the Sunday afternoon Mrs Baines was trying to repose a little in the drawing-room, where she had caused a fire to be lighted. Constance was in the adjacent bedroom with her father. Sophia lay between blankets in the room overhead with a feverish cold. This cold and her new dress were Mrs Baines's sole consolation at the moment. She had prophesied a cold for Sophia, refuser of castor-oil, and it had come. Sophia had received, for standing in her nightdress at a draughty window of a May morning, what Mrs Baines called "nature's slap in the face." As for the dress, she had worshipped God in it, and prayed for Sophia in it, before dinner; and its four double rows of gimp on the skirt had been accounted a great success. With her lace-bordered mantle and her low, stringed bonnet she had assuredly given a unique lustre to the congregation at chapel. She was stout; but the fashions, prescribing vague outlines, broad downward slopes, and vast amplitudes, were favourable to her shape. It must not be supposed that stout women of a certain age never seek to seduce the eye and trouble the meditations of man by other than moral charms. Mrs Baines knew that she was comely, natty, imposing, and elegant; and the knowledge gave her real pleasure. She

would look over her shoulder in the glass as anxious as a girl: make no mistake.

She did not repose; she could not. She sat thinking in exactly the same posture as Sophia's two afternoons previously. She would have been surprised to hear that her attitude, bearing, and expression powerfully recalled those of her reprehensible daughter. But it was so. A good angel made her restless, and she went idly to the window and glanced upon the empty, shuttered Square. She too, majestic matron, had strange, brief yearnings for an existence more romantic than this; shootings across her spirit's firmament of tailed comets; soft, inexplicable melancholies. The good angel, withdrawing her from such a mood, directed her gaze to a particular spot at the top of the Square.

She passed at once out of the room—not precisely in a hurry, yet without wasting time. In a recess under the stairs, immediately outside the door, was a box about a foot square and eighteen inches deep covered with black American cloth. She bent down and unlocked this box, which was padded within and contained the Baines silver tea-service. She drew from the box teapot, sugar-bowl, milk-jug, sugar-tongs, hot-water jug, and cake-stand (a flattish dish with an arching semicircular handle)—chased vessels, silver without and silver-gilt within; glittering heirlooms that shone in the dark corner like the secret pride of respectable families. These she put on a tray that always stood on end in the recess. Then she looked upwards through the banisters to the second floor.

"Maggie!" she piercingly whispered.

"Yes, mum," came a voice.

"Are you dressed?"

"Yes, mum. I'm just coming."

"Well, put on your muslin." "Apron," Mrs Baines implied.

Maggie understood.

"Take these for tea," said Mrs Baines when Maggie descended. "Better rub them over. You know where the cake is—that new one. The best cups. And the silver spoons."

They both heard a knock at the side door, far off, below.

"There!" exclaimed Mrs Baines. "Now take these right down into the kitchen before you open."

"Yes, mum," said Maggie, departing.

Mrs Baines was wearing a black alpaca apron. She removed it and put on another one of black satin embroidered with yellow flowers, which, by merely inserting her arm into the chamber, she had taken from off the chest of drawers in her bedroom. Then she fixed herself in the drawing-room.

Maggie returned, rather short of breath, convoying the visitor.

"Ah! Miss Chetwynd," said Mrs Baines, rising to welcome. "I'm sure I'm delighted to see you. I saw you coming down the Square, and I said to myself, 'Now, I do hope Miss Chetwynd isn't going to forget us.' "

Miss Chetwynd, simpering momentarily, came forward with that self-conscious, slightly histrionic air, which is one of the penalties of pedagogy. She lived under the eyes of her pupils. Her life was one ceaseless effort to avoid doing anything which might influence her charges for evil or shock the natural sensitiveness of their parents. She had to wind her earthly way through a forest of the most delicate susceptibilities—fern-fronds that stretched across the path, and that she must not even accidentally disturb with her skirt as she passed. No wonder she walked mincingly! No wonder she had a habit of keeping her elbows close to her sides, and drawing her mantle tight in the streets! Her prospectus talked about "a sound and religious course of training," "study embracing the usual branches of English, with music by a talented master, drawing, dancing, and calisthenics." Also "needlework plain and ornamental"; also "moral influence"; and finally about terms, "which are very moderate, and every particular, with reference to parents and others, furnished on application." (Sometimes, too, without application.) As an illustration of the delicacy of fern-fronds, that single word "dancing" had nearly lost her Constance and Sophia seven years before!

She was a pinched virgin, aged forty, and not "well off"; in her family the gift of success had been monopolized by her elder sister. For these characteristics Mrs Baines, as a matron in easy circumstances, pitied Miss Chetwynd. On the other hand, Miss Chetwynd could choose ground from which to look down upon Mrs Baines, who after all was in trade. Miss Chetwynd had no trace of the local accent; she spoke with a southern refinement which the Five Towns, while making fun of it, envied. All her O's had a genteel leaning towards "ow," as ritualism leans towards Romanism. And she was the fount of etiquette, a wonder of correctness; in the eyes of her pupils' parents not so much "a perfect *lady*" as "a *perfect* lady." So that it was an extremely nice question whether, upon the whole, Mrs Baines secretly condescended to Miss Chetwynd or Miss Chetwynd to Mrs Baines. Perhaps Mrs Baines, by virtue of her wifehood, carried the day.

Miss Chetwynd, carefully and precisely seated, opened the conversation by explaining that even if Mrs Baines had not written she would have called in any case, as she made a practice of calling at the home of her pupils in vacation time: which was true. Mrs Baines, it should be stated, had on Friday afternoon sent to Miss Chetwynd one of her most luxurious notes—lavender-coloured paper with scalloped edges, the selectest mode of the day—to announce, in her Italian hand, that Constance and Sophia would both leave school at the end of next term, and giving reasons in regard to Sophia.

Before the visitor had got very far, Maggie came in with a lacquered tea-caddy and the silver teapot and a silver spoon on a lacquered tray. Mrs Baines, while continuing to talk, chose a key from her bunch, unlocked

the tea-caddy, and transferred four teaspoonfuls of tea from it to the teapot and relocked the caddy.

"Strawberry," she mysteriously whispered to Maggie; and Maggie disappeared, bearing the tray and its contents.

"And how is your sister? It is quite a long time since she was down here," Mrs Baines went on to Miss Chetwynd, after whispering "strawberry."

The remark was merely in the way of small-talk—for the hostess felt a certain unwilling hesitation to approach the topic of daughters—but it happened to suit the social purpose of Miss Chetwynd to a nicety. Miss Chetwynd was a vessel brimming with great tidings.

"She is very well, thank you," said Miss Chetwynd, and her expression grew exceedingly vivacious. Her face glowed with pride as she added, "Of course everything is changed now."

"Indeed?" murmured Mrs Baines, with polite curiosity.

"Yes," said Miss Chetwynd. "You've not heard?"

"No," said Mrs Baines. Miss Chetwynd knew that she had not heard.

"About Elizabeth's engagement? To the Reverend Archibald Jones?"

It is the fact that Mrs Baines was taken aback. She did nothing indiscreet; she did not give vent to her excusable amazement that the elder Miss Chetwynd should be engaged to anyone at all, as some women would have done in the stress of the moment. She kept her presence of mind.

"This is really *most* interesting!" said she.

It was. For Archibald Jones was one of the idols of the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, a special preacher famous throughout England. At "Anniversaries" and "Trust sermons," Archibald Jones had probably no rival. His Christian name helped him; it was a luscious, resounding mouthful for admirers. He was not an itinerant minister, migrating every three years. His function was to direct the affairs of the "Book Room," the publishing department of the Connexion. He lived in London, and shot out into the provinces at week-ends, preaching on Sundays and giving a lecture, tinctured with bookishness, "in the chapel" on Monday evenings. In every town he visited there was competition for the privilege of entertaining him. He had zeal, indefatigable energy, and a breezy wit. He was a widower of fifty, and his wife had been dead for twenty years. It had seemed as if women were not for this bright star. And here Elizabeth Chetwynd, who had left the Five Towns a quarter of a century before at the age of twenty, had caught him! Austere, moustached, formidable, desiccated, she must have done it with her powerful intellect! It must be a union of intellects! He had been impressed by hers, and she by his, and then their intellects had kissed. Within a week fifty thousand women in forty counties had pictured to themselves this osculation of intellects, and shrugged their shoulders, and decided once more that men were incomprehensible. These great ones in London, falling in love like the rest! But no! Love was a ribald and voluptuous word to use in such a matter as this. It was generally felt that the Reverend Archibald Jones and Miss Chetwynd the elder would lift marriage to what would now be termed an astral plane.

After tea had been served, Mrs Baines gradually recovered her position, both in her own private esteem and in the deference of Miss Aline Chetwynd.

"Yes," said she. "You can talk about your sister, and you can call *him* Archibald, and you can mince up your words. But have you got a tea-service like this? Can you conceive more perfect strawberry jam than this? Did not my dress cost more than you spend on your clothes in a year? Has a man ever looked at you? After all, is there not something about my situation . . . in short, something . . . ?"

She did not say this aloud. She in no way deviated from the scrupulous politeness of a hostess. There was nothing in even her tone to indicate that Mrs John Baines was a personage. Yet it suddenly occurred to Miss Chetwynd that her pride in being the prospective sister-in-law of the Rev. Archibald Jones would be better for a while in her pocket. And she inquired after Mr Baines. After this the conversation limped somewhat.

"I suppose you weren't surprised by my letter?" said Mrs Baines.

"I was and I wasn't," answered Miss Chetwynd, in her professional manner and not her manner of a prospective sister-in-law. "Of course I am naturally sorry to lose two such good pupils, but we can't keep our pupils for ever." She smiled; she was not without fortitude—it is easier to lose pupils than to replace them. "Still"—a pause—"what you say of Sophia is perfectly true, perfectly. She is quite as advanced as Constance. Still"—another pause and a more rapid enunciation—"Sophia is by no means an ordinary girl."

"I hope she hasn't been a very great trouble to you?"

"Oh *no*!" exclaimed Miss Chetwynd. "Sophia and I have got on very well together. I have always tried to appeal to her reason. I have never *forced* her . . . Now, with some girls . . . In some ways I look on Sophia as the most remarkable girl—not pupil—but the most remarkable—what shall I say?—individuality, that I have ever met with." And her demeanour added, "And, mind you, this is something—from me!"

"Indeed!" said Mrs Baines. She told herself, "I am not your common foolish parent. I see my children impartially. I am incapable of being flattered concerning them."

Nevertheless she was flattered, and the thought shaped itself that really Sophia was no ordinary girl.

"I suppose she has talked to you about becoming a teacher?" asked Miss Chetwynd, taking a morsel of the unparalleled jam.

She held the spoon with her thumb and three fingers. Her fourth finger, in matters of honest labour, would

never associate with the other three; delicately curved, it always drew proudly away from them.

"Has she mentioned that to you?" Mrs Baines demanded, startled.

"Oh yes!" said Miss Chetwynd. "Several times. Sophia is a very secretive girl, very—but I think I may say I have always had her confidence. There have been times when Sophia and I have been very near each other. Elizabeth was much struck with her. Indeed, I may tell you that in one of her last letters to me she spoke of Sophia and said she had mentioned her to Mr Jones, and Mr Jones remembered her quite well."

Impossible for even a wise, uncommon parent not to be affected by such an announcement!

"I dare say your sister will give up her school now," observed Mrs Baines, to divert attention from her self-consciousness.

"Oh *no*!" And this time Mrs Baines had genuinely shocked Miss Chetwynd. "Nothing would induce Elizabeth to give up the cause of education. Archibald takes the keenest interest in the school. Oh no! Not for worlds!"

"*Then you think Sophia would make a good teacher?*" asked Mrs Baines with apparent inconsequence, and with a smile. But the words marked an epoch in her mind. All was over.

"I think she is very much set on it and—"

"That wouldn't affect her father—or me," said Mrs Baines quickly.

"Certainly not! I merely say that she is very much set on it. Yes, she would, at any rate, make a teacher far superior to the average." ("That girl has got the better of her mother without me!" she reflected.) "Ah! Here is dear Constance!"

Constance, tempted beyond her strength by the sounds of the visit and the colloquy, had slipped into the room.

"I've left both doors open, mother," she excused herself for quitting her father, and kissed Miss Chetwynd.

She blushed, but she blushed happily, and really made a most creditable *début* as a young lady. Her mother rewarded her by taking her into the conversation. And history was soon made.

So Sophia was apprenticed to Miss Aline Chetwynd. Mrs Baines bore herself greatly. It was Miss Chetwynd who had urged, and her respect for Miss Chetwynd . . . Also somehow the Reverend Archibald Jones came into the cause . . . Of course the idea of Sophia ever going to London was ridiculous, ridiculous! (Mrs Baines secretly feared that the ridiculous might happen; but, with the Reverend Archibald Jones on the spot, the worst could be faced.) Sophia must understand that even the apprenticeship in Bursley was merely a trial. They would see how things went on. She had to thank Miss Chetwynd . . .

"I made Miss Chetwynd come and talk to mother," said Sophia magnificently one night to simple Constance, as if to imply, "Your Miss Chetwynd is my washpot."

To Constance, Sophia's mere enterprise was just as staggering as her success. Fancy her deliberately going out that Saturday morning, after her mother's definite decision, to enlist Miss Chetwynd in her aid!

There is no need to insist on the tragic grandeur of Mrs Baines's renunciation—a renunciation which implied her acceptance of a change in the balance of power in her realm. Part of its tragedy was that none, not even Constance, could divine the intensity of Mrs Baines's suffering. She had no confidant; she was incapable of showing a wound. But when she lay awake at night by the organism which had once been her husband, she dwelt long and deeply on the martyrdom of her life. What had she done to deserve it? Always had she conscientiously endeavoured to be kind, just, patient. And she knew herself to be sagacious and prudent. In the frightful and unguessed trials of her existence as a wife, surely she might have been granted consolations as a mother! Yet no; it had not been! And she felt all the bitterness of age against youth—youth egotistic, harsh, cruel, uncompromising; youth that is so crude, so ignorant of life, so slow to understand! She had Constance. Yes, but it would be twenty years before Constance could appreciate the sacrifice of judgement and of pride which her mother had made, in a sudden decision, during that rambling, starched, simpering interview with Miss Aline Chetwynd. Probably Constance thought that she had yielded to Sophia's passionate temper! Impossible to explain to Constance that she had yielded to nothing but a perception of Sophia's complete inability to hear reason and wisdom. Ah! Sometimes as she lay in the dark, she would, in fancy, snatch her heart from her bosom and fling it down before Sophia, bleeding, and cry: "See what I carry about with me, on your account!" Then she would take it back and hide it again, and sweeten her bitterness with wise admonitions to herself.

All this because Sophia, aware that if she stayed in the house she would be compelled to help in the shop, chose an honourable activity which freed her from the danger. Heart, how absurd of you to bleed!

CHAPTER IV

ELEPHANT

I

"Sophia, will you come and see the elephant? Do come!" Constance entered the drawing-room with this request on her eager lips.

"No," said Sophia, with a touch of condescension. "I'm far too busy for elephants."

Only two years had passed; but both girls were grown up now; long sleeves, long skirts, hair that had settled down in life; and a demeanour immensely serious, as though existence were terrific in its responsibilities; yet sometimes childhood surprisingly broke through the crust of gravity, as now in Constance, aroused by such things as elephants, and proclaimed with vivacious gestures that it was not dead after all. The sisters were sharply differentiated. Constance wore the black alpaca apron and the scissors at the end of long black elastic, which indicated her vocation in the shop. She was proving a considerable success in the millinery department. She had learnt how to talk to people, and was, in her modest way, very self-possessed. She was getting a little stouter. Everybody liked her. Sophia had developed into the student. Time had accentuated her reserve. Her sole friend was Miss Chetwynd, with whom she was, having regard to the disparity of their ages, very intimate. At home she spoke little. She lacked amiability; as her mother said, she was "touchy." She required diplomacy from others, but did not render it again. Her attitude, indeed, was one of half-hidden disdain, now gentle, now coldly bitter. She would not wear an apron, in an age when aprons were almost essential to decency. No! She would *not* wear an apron, and there was an end of it. She was not so tidy as Constance, and if Constance's hands had taken on the coarse texture which comes from commerce with needles, pins, artificial flowers, and stuffs, Sophia's fine hands were seldom innocent of ink. But Sophia was splendidly beautiful. And even her mother and Constance had an instinctive idea that that face was, at any rate, a partial excuse for her asperity.

"Well," said Constance, "if you won't, I do believe I shall ask mother if she will."

Sophia, bending over her books, made no answer. But the top of her head said: "This has no interest for me whatever."

Constance left the room, and in a moment returned with her mother.

"Sophia," said her mother, with gay excitement, "you might go and sit with your father for a bit while Constance and I just run up to the playground to see the elephant. You can work just as well in there as here. Your father's asleep."

"Oh, very well!" Sophia agreed haughtily. "Whatever is all this fuss about an elephant? Anyhow, it'll be quieter in your room. The noise here is splitting." She gave a supercilious glance into the Square as she languidly rose.

It was the morning of the third day of Bursley Wakes; not the mod ern finicking and respectable, but an orgiastic carnival, gross in all its manifestations of joy. The whole centre of the town was given over to the furious pleasures of the people. Most of the Square was occupied by Wombwell's Menagerie, in a vast oblong tent, whose raging beasts roared and growled day and night. And spreading away from this supreme attraction, right up through the market-place past the Town Hall to Duck Bank, Duck Square and the waste land called the "playground" were hundreds of booths with banners displaying all the delights of the horrible. You could see the atrocities of the French Revolution, and of the Fiji Islands, and the ravages of unspeakable diseases, and the living flesh of a nearly nude human female guaranteed to turn the scale at twenty-two stone, and the skeletons of the mysterious phantoscope, and the bloody contests of champions naked to the waist (with the chance of picking up a red tooth as a relic). You could try your strength by hitting an image of a fellow-creature in the stomach, and test your aim by knocking off the heads of other images with a wooden ball. You could also shoot with rifles at various targets. All the streets were lined with stalls loaded with food in heaps, chiefly dried fish, the entrails of animals and gingerbread. All the public-houses were crammed and frenzied jolly drunkards, men and women, lounged along the pavements everywhere, their shouts vying with the trumpets, horns, and drums of the booths, and the shrieking, rattling toys that the children carried.

It was a glorious spectacle, but not a spectacle for the leading families. Miss Chetwynd's school was closed, so that the daughters of leading families might remain in seclusion till the worst was over. The Baineses ignored the Wakes in every possible way, choosing that week to have a show of mourning goods in the left-hand window, and refusing to let Maggie outside on any pretext. Therefore the dazzling social success of the elephant, which was quite easily drawing Mrs Baines into the vortex, cannot imaginably be overestimated.

On the previous night one of the three Wombwell elephants had suddenly knelt on a man in the tent; he had then walked out of the tent and picked up another man at haphazard from the crowd which was staring at the great pictures in front, and tried to put this second man into his mouth. Being stopped by his Indian attendant with a pitchfork, he placed the man on the ground and stuck his tusk through an artery of the victim's arm. He then, amid unexampled excitement, suffered himself to be led away. He was conducted to the rear of the tent, just in front of Baines's shuttered windows, and by means of stakes, pulleys, and ropes forced to his knees. His head was whitewashed, and six men of the Rifle Corps were engaged to shoot at him at a distance of five yards, while constables kept the crowd off with truncheons. He died instantly, rolling over with a soft thud. The crowd cheered, and intoxicated by their importance, the Volunteers fired three more volleys into the carcase, and were then borne off as heroes to different inns. The elephant, by the help of his two companions, was got on to a railway lorry and disappeared into the night. Such was the greatest sensation that has ever occurred, or perhaps will ever occur, in Bursley. The excitement about the repeal of the Corn Laws, or about Inkerman, was feeble compared to that excitement. Mr Critchlow, who had been called on to put a hasty tourniquet round the arm of the second victim, had popped in afterwards to tell John Baines all about it. Mr Baines's interest, however, had been slight. Mr Critchlow succeeded better with the ladies, who, though they had witnessed the shooting from the drawing-room, were thirsty for the most trifling details.

The next day it was known that the elephant lay near the playground, pending the decision of the Chief Bailiff and the Medical Officer as to his burial. And everybody had to visit the corpse. No social exclusiveness could withstand the seduction of that dead elephant. Pilgrims travelled from all the Five Towns to see him.

"We're going now," said Mrs Baines, after she had assumed her bonnet and shawl.

"All right," said Sophia, pretending to be absorbed in study, as she sat on the sofa at the foot of her father's bed.

And Constance, having put her head in at the door, drew her mother after her like a magnet.

Then Sophia heard a remarkable conversation in the passage.

"Are you going up to see the elephant, Mrs Baines?" asked the voice of Mr Povey.

"Yes. Why?"

"I think I had better come with you. The crowd is sure to be very rough." Mr Povey's tone was firm; he had a position.

"But the shop?"

"We shall not be long," said Mr Povey.

"Oh yes, mother," Constance added appealingly.

Sophia felt the house thrill as the side-door banged. She sprang up and watched the three cross King Street diagonally, and so plunge into the Wakes. This triple departure was surely the crowning tribute to the dead elephant! It was simply astonishing. It caused Sophia to perceive that she had miscalculated the importance of the elephant. It made her regret her scorn of the elephant as an attraction. She was left behind; and the joy of life was calling her. She could see down into the Vaults on the opposite side of the street, where working men —potters and colliers—in their best clothes, some with high hats, were drinking, gesticulating, and laughing in a row at a long counter.

She noticed, while she was thus at the bedroom window, a young man ascending King Street, followed by a porter trundling a flat barrow of luggage. He passed slowly under the very window. She flushed. She had evidently been startled by the sight of this young man into no ordinary state of commotion. She glanced at the books on the sofa, and then at her father. Mr Baines, thin and gaunt, and acutely pitiable, still slept. His brain had almost ceased to be active now; he had to be fed and tended like a bearded baby, and he would sleep for hours at a stretch even in the daytime. Sophia left the room. A moment later she ran into the shop, an apparition that amazed the three young lady assistants. At the corner near the window on the fancy side a little nook had been formed by screening off a portion of the counter with large flower-boxes placed end-up. This corner had come to be known as "Miss Baines's corner." Sophia hastened to it, squeezing past a young lady assistant in the narrow space between the back of the counter and the shelf-lined wall. She sat down in Constance's chair and pretended to look for something. She had examined herself in the cheval-glass in the showroom, on her way from the sick-chamber. When she heard a voice near the door of the shop asking first for Mr Povey and then for Mrs Baines, she rose, and seizing the object nearest to her, which happened to be a pair of scissors, she hurried towards the showroom stairs as though the scissors had been a grail, passionately sought and to be jealously hidden away. She wanted to stop and turn round, but something prevented her. She was at the end of the counter, under the curving stairs, when one of the assistants said:

"I suppose you don't know when Mr Povey or your mother are likely to be back, Miss Sophia? Here's—"

It was a divine release for Sophia.

“They’re—I—” she stammered, turning round abruptly. Luckily she was still sheltered behind the counter.

The young man whom she had seen in the street came boldly forward.

“Good morning, Miss Sophia,” said he, hat in hand. “It is a long time since I had the pleasure of seeing you.”

Never had she blushed as she blushed then. She scarcely knew what she was doing as she moved slowly towards her sister’s corner again, the young man following her on the customers’ side of the counter.

II

She knew that he was a traveller for the most renowned and gigantic of all Manchester wholesale firms—Birkinshaws. But she did not know his name, which was Gerald Scales. He was a rather short, but extremely well-proportioned man of thirty, with fair hair, and a distinguished appearance, as became a representative of Birkinshaw’s. His broad, tight necktie, with an edge of white collar showing above it, was particularly elegant. He had been on the road for Birkinshaws for several years; but Sophia had only seen him once before in her life, when she was a little girl, three years ago. The relations between the travellers of the great firms and their solid, sure clients in small towns were in those days often cordially intimate. The traveller came with the lustre of a historic reputation around him; there was no need to fawn for orders; and the client’s immense and immaculate respectability made him the equal of no matter what ambassador. It was a case of mutual esteem, and of that confidence-generating phenomenon, “an old account.” The tone in which a commercial traveller of middle age would utter the phrase “an old account” revealed in a flash all that was romantic, prim, and stately in mid-Victorian commerce. In the days of Baines, after one of the elaborately engraved advice-circulars had arrived (“Our Mr———will have the pleasure of waiting upon you on——day next, the——— inst.”) John might in certain cases be expected to say, on the morning of——day, “Missis, what have ye gotten for supper tonight?”

Mr Gerald Scales had never been asked to supper; he had never even seen John Baines; but, as the youthful successor of an aged traveller who had had the pleasure of St Luke’s Square, on behalf of Birkinshaws, since before railways, Mrs Baines had treated him with a faint agreeable touch of maternal familiarity; and, both her daughters being once in the shop during his visit, she had on that occasion commanded the gawky girls to shake hands with him.

Sophia had never forgotten that glimpse. The young man without a name had lived in her mind, brightly glowing, as the very symbol and incarnation of the masculine and the elegant.

The renewed sight of him seemed to have wakened her out of a sleep. Assuredly she was not the same Sophia. As she sat in her sister’s chair in the corner, entrenched behind the perpendicular boxes, playing nervously with the scissors, her beautiful face was transfigured into the ravishingly angelic. It would have been impossible for Mr Gerald Scales, or anybody else, to credit, as he gazed at those lovely, sensitive, vivacious, responsive features, that Sophia was not a character of heavenly sweetness and perfection. She did not know what she was doing; she was nothing but the exquisite expression of a deep instinct to attract and charm. Her soul itself emanated from her in an atmosphere of allurement and acquiescence. Could those laughing lips hang in a heavy pout? Could that delicate and mild voice be harsh? Could those burning eyes be coldly inimical? Never! The idea was inconceivable! And Mr Gerald Scales, with his head over the top of the boxes, yielded to the spell. Remarkable that Mr Gerald Scales, with all his experience, should have had to come to Bursley to find the pearl, the paragon, the ideal! But so it was. They met in an equal abandonment; the only difference between them was that Mr Scales, by force of habit, kept his head.

“I see it’s your wakes here,” said he.

He was polite to the wakes; but now, with the least inflection in the world, he put the wakes at its proper level in the scheme of things as a local unimportance! She adored him for this; she was athirst for sympathy in the task of scorning everything local.

“I expect you didn’t know,” she said, implying that there was every reason why a man of his mundane interests should not know.

“I should have remembered if I had thought,” said he. “But I didn’t think. What’s this about an elephant?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Have you heard of that?”

“My porter was full of it.”

“Well,” she said, “of course it’s a very big thing in Bursley.”

As she smiled in gentle pity of poor Bursley, he naturally did the same. And he thought how much more advanced and broad the younger generation was than the old! He would never have dared to express his real feelings about Bursley to Mrs Baines, or even to Mr Povey (who was, however, of no generation); yet here was a young woman actually sharing them.

She told him all the history of the elephant.

“Must have been very exciting,” he commented, despite himself.

“Do you know,” she replied, “it *was*.”

After all, Bursley was climbing in their opinion.

“And mother and my sister and Mr Povey have all gone to see it. That’s why they’re not here.”

That the elephant should have caused both Mr Povey and Mrs Baines to forget that the representative of Birkinshaws was due to call was indeed a final victory for the elephant.

"But not you!" he exclaimed.

"No," she said. "Not me."

"Why didn't you go too?" He continued his flattering investigations with a generous smile.

"I simply didn't care to," said she, proudly nonchalant.

"And I suppose you are in charge here?"

"No," she answered. "I just happened to have run down here for these scissors. That's all."

"I often see your sister," said he. " 'Often' do I say?—that is, generally, when I come; but never you."

"I'm never in the shop," she said. "It's just an accident today."

"Oh! So you leave the shop to your sister?"

"Yes." She said nothing of her teaching.

Then there was a silence. Sophia was very thankful to be hidden from the curiosity of the shop. The shop could see nothing of her, and only the back of the young man; and the conversation had been conducted in low voices. She tapped her foot, stared at the worn, polished surface of the counter, with the brass yard-measure nailed along its edge, and then she uneasily turned her gaze to the left and seemed to be examining the backs of the black bonnets which were perched on high stands in the great window. Then her eyes caught his for an important moment.

"Yes," she breathed. Somebody had to say something. If the shop missed the murmur of their voices the shop would wonder what had happened to them.

Mr Scales looked at his watch. "I dare say if I come in again about two—" he began.

"Oh yes, they're *sure* to be in then," she burst out before he could finish his sentence.

He left abruptly, queerly, without shaking hands (but then it would have been difficult—she argued—for him to have put his arm over the boxes), and without expressing the hope of seeing her again. She peeped through the black bonnets, and saw the porter put the leather strap over his shoulders, raise the rear of the barrow, and trundle off; but she did not see Mr Scales. She was drunk; thoughts were tumbling about in her brain like cargo loose in a rolling ship. Her entire conception of herself was being altered; her attitude towards life was being altered. The thought which knocked hardest against its fellows was, "Only in these moments have I begun to live!"

And as she flitted upstairs to resume watch over her father she sought to devise an innocent-looking method by which she might see Mr Scales when he next called. And she speculated as to what his name was.

III

When Sophia arrived in the bedroom, she was startled because her father's head and beard were not in their accustomed place on the pillow. She could only make out something vaguely unusual sloping off the side of the bed. A few seconds passed—not to be measured in time—and she saw that the upper part of his body had slipped down, and his head was hanging, inverted, near the floor between the bed and the ottoman. His face, neck, and hands were dark and congested; his mouth was open, and the tongue protruded between the black, swollen, mucous lips; his eyes were prominent and coldly staring. The fact was that Mr Baines had wakened up, and, being restless, had slid out partially from his bed and died of asphyxia. After having been unceasingly watched for fourteen years, he had, with an invalid's natural perverseness, taken advantage of Sophia's brief dereliction to expire. Say what you will, amid Sophia's horror, and her terrible grief and shame, she had visitings of the idea: he did it on purpose!

She ran out of the room, knowing by intuition that he was dead, and shrieked out, "Maggie," at the top of her voice; the house echoed.

"Yes, miss," said Maggie, quite close, coming out of Mr Povey's chamber with a slop-pail.

"Fetch Mr Critchlow at once. Be quick. Just as you are. It's father—"

Maggie, perceiving darkly that disaster was in the air, and instantly filled with importance and a sort of black joy, dropped her pail in the exact middle of the passage, and almost fell down the crooked stairs. One of Maggie's deepest instincts, always held in check by the stern dominance of Mrs Baines, was to leave pails prominent on the main routes of the house; and now, divining what was at hand, it flamed into insurrection.

No sleepless night had ever been so long to Sophia as the three minutes which elapsed before Mr Critchlow came. As she stood on the mat outside the bedroom door she tried to draw her mother and Constance and Mr Povey by magnetic force out of the wakes into the house, and her muscles were contracted in the strange effort. She felt that it was impossible to continue living if the secret of the bedroom remained unknown one instant longer, so intense was her torture, and yet that the torture which could not be borne must be borne. Not a sound in the house! Not a sound from the shop! Only the distant murmur of the wakes!

"Why did I forget father?" she asked herself with awe. "I only meant to tell *him* that they were all out, and run back. Why did I forget father?" She would never be able to persuade anybody that she had literally forgotten her father's existence for quite ten minutes; but it was true, though shocking.

Then there were noises downstairs.

“Bless us! Bless us!” came the unpleasant voice of Mr Critchlow as he bounded up the stairs on his long legs; he strode over the pail. “What’s amiss?” He was wearing his white apron, and he carried his spectacles in his bony hand.

“It’s father—he’s—” Sophia faltered.

She stood away so that he should enter the room first. He glanced at her keenly, and as it were resentfully, and went in. She followed, timidly, remaining near the door while Mr Critchlow inspected her handiwork. He put on his spectacles with strange deliberation, and then, bending his knees outwards, thus lowered his body so that he could examine John Baines point-blank. He remained staring like this, his hands on his sharp apron-covered knees, for a little space; and then he seized the inert mass and restored it to the bed, and wiped those clotted lips with his apron.

Sophia heard loud breathing behind her. It was Maggie. She heard a huge, snorting sob; Maggie was showing her emotion.

“Go fetch doctor!” Mr Critchlow rasped. “And don’t stand gaping there!”

“Run for the doctor, Maggie,” said Sophia.

“How came ye to let him fall?” Mr Critchlow demanded.

“I was out of the room. I just ran down into the shop—”

“Gallivanting with that young Scales!” said Mr Critchlow, with devilish ferocity. “Well, you’ve killed yer father; that’s all!”

He must have been at his shop door and seen the entry of the traveller! And it was precisely characteristic of Mr Critchlow to jump in the dark at a horrible conclusion, and to be right after all. For Sophia Mr Critchlow had always been the personification of malignity and malevolence, and now these qualities in him made him, to her, almost obscene. Her pride brought up tremendous reinforcements, and she approached the bed.

“Is he dead?” she asked in a quiet tone. (Somewhere within a voice was whispering, “So his name is Scales.”)

“Don’t I tell you he’s dead?”

“Pail on the stairs!”

This mild exclamation came from the passage. Mrs Baines, misliking the crowds abroad, had returned alone; she had left Constance in charge of Mr Povey. Coming into her house by the shop and showroom, she had first noted the phenomenon of the pail—proof of her theory of Maggie’s incurable untidiness.

“Been to see the elephant, I reckon!” said Mr Critchlow, in fierce sarcasm, as he recognized Mrs Baines’s voice.

Sophia leaped towards the door, as though to bar her mother’s entrance. But Mrs Baines was already opening the door.

“Well, my pet—” she was beginning cheerfully.

Mr Critchlow confronted her. And he had no more pity for the wife than for the daughter. He was furiously angry because his precious property had been irretrievably damaged by the momentary carelessness of a silly girl. Yes, John Baines was his property, his dearest toy! He was convinced that he alone had kept John Baines alive for fourteen years, that he alone had fully understood the case and sympathized with the sufferer, that none but he had been capable of displaying ordinary common sense in the sick-room. He had learned to regard John Baines as, in some sort, his creation. And now, with their stupidity, their neglect, their elephants, between them they had done for John Baines. He had always known it would come to that, and it had come to that.

“She let him fall out o’bed, and ye’re a widow now, missus!” he announced with a virulence hardly conceivable. His angular features and dark eyes expressed a murderous hate for every woman named Baines.

“Mother!” cried Sophia, “I only ran down into the shop to—to—”

She seized her mother’s arm in frenzied agony.

“My child!” said Mrs Baines, rising miraculously to the situation with a calm benevolence of tone and gesture that remained for ever sublime in the stormy heart of Sophia, “do not hold me.” With infinite gentleness she loosed herself from these clasping hands. “Have you sent for the doctor?” she questioned Mr Critchlow.

The fate of her husband presented no mysteries to Mrs Baines. Everybody had been warned a thousand times of the danger of leaving the paralytic, whose life depended on his position, and whose fidgetiness was thereby a constant menace of death to him. For five thousand nights she had wakened infallibly every time he stirred, and rearranged him by the flicker of a little oil lamp. But Sophia, unhappy creature, had merely left him. That was all.

Mr Critchlow and the widow gazed, helplessly waiting, at the pitiable corpse, of which the salient part was the white beard. They knew not that they were gazing at a vanished era. John Baines had belonged to the past, to the age when men really did think of their souls, when orators by phrases could move crowds to fury or to pity, when no one had learnt to hurry, when Demos was only turning in his sleep, when the sole beauty of life resided in its inflexible and slow dignity, when hell really had no bottom, and a gilt-clasped Bible really was the secret of England’s greatness. Mid-Victorian England lay on that mahogany bed. Ideals had passed

away with John Baines. It is thus that ideals die; not in the conventional pageantry of honoured death, but sorrily, ignobly, while one's head is turned—

And Mr Povey and Constance, very self-conscious, went and saw the dead elephant, and came back; and at the corner of King Street, Constance exclaimed brightly—

"Why! who's gone out and left the side-door open?"

For the doctor had at length arrived, and Maggie, in showing him upstairs with pious haste, had forgotten to shut the door.

And they took advantage of the side-door, rather guiltily, to avoid the eyes of the shop. They feared that in the parlour they would be the centre of a curiosity half ironical and half reproving; for had they not accomplished an escapade? So they walked slowly.

The real murderer was having his dinner in the commercial room up at the Tiger, opposite the Town Hall.

IV

Several shutters were put up in the windows of the shop, to indicate a death, and the news instantly became known in trading circles throughout the town. Many people simultaneously remarked upon the coincidence that Mr Baines should have died while there was a show of mourning goods in his establishment. This coincidence was regarded as extremely sinister, and it was apparently felt that, for the sake of the mind's peace, one ought not to inquire into such things too closely. From the moment of putting up the prescribed shutters, John Baines and his funeral began to acquire importance in Bursley, and their importance grew rapidly almost from hour to hour. The wakes continued as usual, except that the Chief Constable, upon representations being made to him by Mr Critchlow and other citizens, descended upon St Luke's Square and forbade the activities of Wombwell's orchestra. Wombwell and the Chief Constable differed as to the justice of the decree, but every well-minded person praised the Chief Constable, and he himself considered that he had enhanced the town's reputation for a decent propriety. It was noticed, too, not without a shiver of the uncanny, that that night the lions and tigers behaved like lambs, whereas on the previous night they had roared the whole Square out of its sleep.

The Chief Constable was not the only individual enlisted by Mr Critchlow in the service of his friend's fame. Mr Critchlow spent hours in recalling the principal citizens to a due sense of John Baines's past greatness. He was determined that his treasured toy should vanish underground with due pomp, and he left nothing undone to that end. He went over to Hanbridge on the still wonderful horse-car, and saw the editor-proprietor of the *Staffordshire Signal* (then a two-penny weekly with no thought of Football editions), and on the very day of the funeral the *Signal* came out with a long and eloquent biography of John Baines. This biography, giving details of his public life, definitely restored him to his legitimate position in the civic memory as an ex-chief bailiff, an ex-chairman of the Burial Board, and of the Five Towns Association for the Advancement of Useful Knowledge, and also as a "prime mover" in the local Turnpike Act, in the negotiations for the new Town Hall, and in the Corinthian façade of the Wesleyan Chapel; it narrated the anecdote of his courageous speech from the portico of the Shambles during the riots of 1848, and it did not omit a eulogy of his steady adherence to the wise old English maxims of commerce and his avoidance of dangerous modern methods. Even in the sixties the modern had reared its shameless head. The panegyric closed with an appreciation of the dead man's fortitude in the terrible affliction with which a divine providence had seen fit to try him; and finally the *Signal* uttered its absolute conviction that his native town would raise a cenotaph to his honour. Mr Critchlow, being unfamiliar with the word "cenotaph," consulted Worcester's Dictionary, and when he found that it meant "a sepulchral monument to one who is buried elsewhere," he was as pleased with the *Signal*'s language as with the idea, and decided that a cenotaph should come to pass.

The house and shop were transformed into a hive of preparation for the funeral. All was changed. Mr Povey kindly slept for three nights on the parlour sofa, in order that Mrs Baines might have his room. The funeral grew into an obsession, for multitudinous things had to be performed and done sumptuously and in strict accordance with precedent. There were the family mourning, the funeral repast, the choice of the text on the memorial card, the composition of the legend on the coffin, the legal arrangements, the letters to relations, the selection of guests, and the questions of bell-ringing, hearse, plumes, number of horses, and grave-digging. Nobody had leisure for the indulgence of grief except Aunt Maria, who, after she had helped in the laying-out, simply sat down and bemoaned unceasingly for hours her absence on the fatal morning. "If I hadn't been so fixed on polishing my candle-sticks," she weepingly repeated, "he mit ha' been alive and well now." Not that Aunt Maria had been informed of the precise circumstances of the death; she was not clearly aware that Mr Baines had died through a piece of neglect. But, like Mr Critchlow, she was convinced that there had been only one person in the world truly capable of nursing Mr Baines. Beyond the family, no one save Mr Critchlow and Dr Harrop knew just how the martyr had finished his career. Dr Harrop, having been asked bluntly if an inquest would be necessary, had reflected a moment and had then replied: "No." And he added, "Least said soonest mended—mark me!" They had marked him. He was common sense in breeches.

As for Aunt Maria, She was sent about her snivelling business by Aunt Harriet. The arrival in the house of this genuine aunt from Axe, of this majestic and enormous widow whom even the imperial Mrs Baines

regarded with a certain awe, set a seal of ultimate solemnity on the whole event. In Mr Povey's bedroom Mrs Baines fell like a child into Aunt Harriet's arms and sobbed:

"If it had been anything else but that elephant!"

Such was Mrs Baines's sole weakness from first to last.

Aunt Harriet was an exhaustless fountain of authority upon every detail concerning interments. And, to a series of questions ending with the word "sister," and answers ending with the word "sister," the prodigious travail incident to the funeral was gradually and successfully accomplished. Dress and the repast exceeded all other matters in complexity and difficulty. But on the morning of the funeral Aunt Harriet had the satisfaction of beholding her younger sister the centre of a tremendous cocoon of crape, whose slightest pleat was perfect. Aunt Harriet seemed to welcome her then, like a veteran, formally into the august army of relicts. As they stood side by side surveying the special table which was being laid in the showroom for the repast, it appeared inconceivable that they had reposed together in Mr Povey's limited bed. They descended from the showroom to the kitchen, where the last delicate dishes were inspected. The shop was, of course, closed for the day, but Mr Povey was busy there, and in Aunt Harriet's all-seeing glance he came next after the dishes. She rose from the kitchen to speak with him.

"You've got your boxes of gloves all ready?" she questioned him.

"Yes, Mrs Maddack."

"You'll not forget to have a measure handy?"

"No, Mrs Maddack."

"You'll find you'll want more of seven-and-three-quarters and eights than anything."

"Yes. I have allowed for that."

"If you place yourself behind the side-door and put your boxes on the harmonium, you'll be able to catch every one as they come in."

"That is what I had thought of, Mrs Maddack."

She went upstairs. Mrs Baines had reached the showroom again, and was smoothing out creases in the white damask cloth and arranging glass dishes of jam at equal distances from each other.

"Come, sister," said Mrs Maddack. "A last look."

And they passed into the mortuary bedroom to gaze at Mr Baines before he should be everlastingly nailed down. In death he had recovered some of his earlier dignity; but even so he was a startling sight. The two widows bent over him, one on either side, and gravely stared at that twisted, worn white face all neatly tucked up in linen.

"I shall fetch Constance and Sophia," said Mrs Maddack, with tears in her voice. "Do you go into the drawing-room, sister."

But Mrs Maddack only succeeded in fetching Constance.

Then there was the sound of wheels in King Street. The long rite of the funeral was about to begin. Every guest, after having been measured and presented with a pair of the finest black kid gloves by Mr Povey, had to mount the crooked stairs and gaze upon the carcase of John Baines, going afterwards to the drawing-room to condole briefly with the widow. And every guest, while conscious of the enormity of so thinking, thought what an excellent thing it was that John Baines should be at last dead and gone. The tramping on the stairs was continual, and finally Mr Baines himself went downstairs, bumping against corners, and led a *cortège* of twenty vehicles.

The funeral tea was not over at seven o'clock, five hours after the commencement of the rite. It was a gigantic and faultless meal, worthy of John Baines's distant past. Only two persons were absent from it—John Baines and Sophia. The emptiness of Sophia's chair was much noticed; Mrs Maddack explained that Sophia was very high-strung and could not trust herself. Great efforts were put forth by the company to be lugubrious and inconsolable, but the secret relief resulting from the death would not be entirely hidden. The vast pretence of acute sorrow could not stand intact against that secret relief and the lavish richness of the food.

To the offending of sundry important relatives from a distance, Mr Critchlow informally presided over that assemblage of grave men in high stocks and crinolined women. He had closed his shop, which had never before been closed on a weekday, and he had a great deal to say about this extraordinary closure. It was due as much to the elephant as to the funeral. The elephant had become a victim to the craze of souvenirs. Already in the night his tusks had been stolen; then his feet disappeared for umbrella-stands, and most of his flesh had departed in little hunks. Everybody in Bursley had resolved to participate in the elephant. One consequence was that all the chemists' shops in the town were assaulted by strings of boys. "Please a peenorth o'alum to tak' smell out o' a bit o' elephant." Mr Critchlow hated boys.

" 'I'll alum ye!' says I, and I did. I alummed him out o' my shop with a pestle. If there'd been one there'd been twenty between opening and nine o'clock. 'George,' I says to my apprentice, 'shut shop up. My old friend John Baines is going to his long home today, and I'll close. I've had enough o' alum for one day.' "

The elephant fed the conversation until after the second relay of hot muffins. When Mr Critchlow had eaten to his capacity, he took the *Signal* importantly from his pocket, posed his spectacles, and read the obituary all through in slow, impressive accents. Before he reached the end Mrs Baines began to perceive that familiarity had blinded her to the heroic qualities of her late husband. The fourteen years of ceaseless care were quite

genuinely forgotten, and she saw him in his strength and in his glory. When Mr Critchlow arrived at the eulogy of the husband and father, Mrs Baines rose and left the showroom. The guests looked at each other in sympathy for her. Mr Critchlow shot a glance at her over his spectacles and continued steadily reading. After he had finished he approached the question of the cenotaph.

Mrs Baines, driven from the banquet by her feelings, went into the drawing-room. Sophia was there, and Sophia, seeing tears in her mother's eyes, gave a sob, and flung herself bodily against her mother, clutching her, and hiding her face in that broad crape, which abraded her soft skin.

"Mother," she wept passionately, "I want to leave the school now. I want to please you. I'll do anything in the world to please you. I'll go into the shop if you'd like me to!" Her voice lost itself in tears.

"Calm yourself, my pet," said Mrs Baines, tenderly, caressing her. It was a triumph for the mother in the very hour when she needed a triumph.

CHAPTER V

THE TRAVELLER

I

"Exquisite, Is. IId."

These singular signs were being painted in shiny black on an unrectangular parallelogram of white cardboard by Constance one evening in the parlour. She was seated, with her left side to the fire and to the fizzing gas, at the dining-table, which was covered with a checked cloth in red and white. Her dress was of dark crimson; she wore a cameo brooch and a gold chain round her neck; over her shoulders was thrown a white knitted shawl, for the weather was extremely cold, the English climate being much more serious and downright at that day than it is now. She bent low to the task, holding her head slightly askew, putting the tip of her tongue between her lips, and expending all the energy of her soul and body in an intense effort to do what she was doing as well as it could be done.

"Splendid!" said Mr Povey.

Mr Povey was fronting her at the table; he had his elbows on the table, and watched her carefully, with the breathless and divine anxiety of a dreamer who is witnessing the realization of his dream. And Constance, without moving any part of her frame except her head, looked up at him and smiled for a moment, and he could see her delicious little nostrils at the end of her snub nose.

Those two, without knowing or guessing it, were making history—the history of commerce. They had no suspicion that they were the forces of the future insidiously at work to destroy what the forces of the past had created, but such was the case. They were conscious merely of a desire to do their duty in the shop and to the shop; probably it had not even occurred to them that this desire, which each stimulated in the breast of the other, had assumed the dimensions of a passion. It was ageing Mr Povey, and it had made of Constance a young lady tremendously industrious and preoccupied.

Mr Povey had recently been given attention to the question of tickets. It is not too much to say that Mr Povey, to whom heaven had granted a minimum share of imagination, had nevertheless discovered his little parcel of imagination in the recesses of being, and brought it effectively to bear on tickets. Tickets ran in conventional grooves. There were heavy oblong tickets for flannels, shirting, and other stuffs in the piece; there were smaller and lighter tickets for intermediate goods; and there were diamond-shaped tickets (containing nothing but the price) for bonnets, gloves, and flim-flams generally. The legends on the tickets gave no sort of original invention. The words "lasting," "durable," "unshrinkable," "latest," "cheap," "stylish," "novelty," "choice" (as an adjective), "new," and "tasteful," exhausted the entire vocabulary of tickets. Now Mr Povey attached importance to tickets, and since he was acknowledged to be the best window-dresser in Bursley, his views were entitled to respect. He dreamed of other tickets, in original shapes, with original legends. In brief, he achieved, in regard to tickets, the rare feat of ridding himself of preconceived notions, and of approaching a subject with fresh, virginal eyes. When he indicated the nature of his wishes to Mr Chawner, the wholesale stationer who supplied all the Five Towns with shop-tickets, Mr Chawner grew uneasy and worried; Mr Chawner was indeed shocked. For Mr Chawner there had always been certain well-defined genera of tickets, and he could not conceive the existence of other genera. When Mr Povey suggested

circular tickets—tickets with a blue and a red line round them, tickets with legends such as “unsurpassable,” “very dainty,” or“please note,” Mr Chawner hummed and hawed, and finally stated that it would be impossible to manufacture these preposterous tickets, these tickets which would outrage the decency of trade.

If Mr Povey had not happened to be an exceedingly obstinate man, he might have been defeated by the crass Toryism of Mr Chawner. But Mr Povey was obstinate, and he had resources of ingenuity which Mr Chawner little suspected. The great tramping march of progress was not to be impeded by Mr Chawner. Mr Povey began to make his own tickets. At first he suffered as all reformers and inventors suffer. He used the internal surface of collar-boxes and ordinary ink and pens, and the result was such as to give customers the idea that Baineses were too poor or too mean to buy tickets like other shops. For bought tickets had an ivory-tinted gloss, and the ink was black and glossy, and the edges were very straight and did not show yellow between two layers of white. Whereas Mr Povey’s tickets were of a bluish-white, without gloss; the ink was neither black nor shiny, and the edges were amateurishly rough: the tickets had an unmistakable air of having been “made out of something else”; moreover, the lettering had not the free, dashing style of Mr Chawner’s tickets.

And did Mrs Baines encourage him in his single-minded enterprise on behalf of *her* business? Not a bit! Mrs Baines’s attitude, when not disdainful, was inimical! So curious is human nature, so blind is man to his own advantage! Life was very complex for Mr Povey. It might have been less complex had Bristol board and Chinese ink been less expensive; with these materials he could have achieved marvels to silence all prejudice and stupidity; but they were too costly. Still, he persevered, and Constance morally supported him; he drew his inspiration and his courage from Constance. Instead of the internal surface of collar-boxes, he tried the external surface, which was at any rate shiny. But the ink would not “take” on it. He made as many experiments as Edison was to make, and as many failures. Then Constance was visited by a notion for mixing sugar with ink. Simple, innocent creature—why should providence have chosen her to be the vessel of such a sublime notion? Puzzling enigma, which, however, did not exercise Mr Povey! He found it quite natural that she should save him. Save him she did. Sugar and ink would “take” on anything, and it shone like a “patent leather” boot. Further, Constance developed a “hand” for lettering which outdid Mr Povey’s. Between them they manufactured tickets by the dozen and by the score—tickets which, while possessing nearly all the smartness and finish of Mr Chawner’s tickets, were much superior to these in originality and strikingness. Constance and Mr Povey were delighted and fascinated by them. As for Mrs Baines, she said little, but the modern spirit was too elated by its success to care whether she said little or much. And every few days Mr Povey thought of some new and wonderful word to put on a ticket.

His last miracle was the word “exquisite.” “Exquisite,” pinned on a piece of broad tartan ribbon, appeared to Constance and Mr Povey as the finality of appropriateness. A climax worthy to close the year! Mr Povey had cut the card and sketched the word and figures in pencil, and Constance was doing her executive portion of the undertaking. They were very happy, very absorbed, in this strictly business matter. The clock showed five minutes past ten. Stern duty, a pure desire for the prosperity of the shop, had kept them at hard labour since before eight o’clock that morning!

The stairs-door opened, and Mrs Baines appeared, in bonnet and furs and gloves, all clad for going out. She had abandoned the cocoon of crape, but still wore weeds. She was stouter than ever.

“What!” she cried. “Not ready! Now really!”

“Oh, mother! How you made me jump!” Constance protested. “What time is it? It surely isn’t time to go yet!”

“Look at the clock!” said Mrs Baines, dryly.

“Well, I never!” Constance murmured, confused.

“Come, put your things together, and don’t keep me waiting,” said Mrs Baines, going past the table to the window, and lifting the blind to peep out. “Still snowing,” she observed. “Oh, the band’s going away at last! I wonder how they can play at all in this weather. By the way, what was that tune they gave us just now? I couldn’t make out whether it was ‘Redhead,’ or—”

“Band?” questioned Constance—the simpleton!

Neither she nor Mr Povey had heard the strains of the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band which had been enlivening the season according to its usual custom. These two practical, duteous, commonsense young and youngish persons had been so absorbed in their efforts for the welfare of the shop that they had positively not only forgotten the time, but had also failed to notice the band! But if Constance had had her wits about her she would at least have pretended that she had heard it.

“What’s this?” asked Mrs Baines, bringing her vast form to the table and picking up a ticket.

Mr Povey said nothing. Constance said: “Mr Povey thought of it today. Don’t you think it’s very good, mother?”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Mrs Baines coldly replied.

She had mildly objected already to certain words; but “exquisite” seemed to her silly; it seemed out of place; she considered that it would merely bring ridicule on her shop. “Exquisite” written upon a window-ticket! No! What would John Baines have thought of “exquisite”?

“ ‘Exquisite’!” She repeated the word with a sarcastic inflection, putting the accent, as every one put it, on

the second syllable. “I don’t think that will quite do.”

“But why not, mother?”

“It’s not suitable, my dear.”

She dropped the ticket from her gloved hand. Mr Povey had darkly flushed. Though he spoke little, he was as sensitive as he was obstinate. On this occasion he said nothing. He expressed his feelings by seizing the ticket and throwing it into the fire.

The situation was extremely delicate. Priceless employees like Mr Povey cannot be treated as machines, and Mrs Baines of course instantly saw that tact was needed.

“Go along to my bedroom and get ready, my pet,” said she to Constance. “Sophia is there. There’s a good fire. I must just speak to Maggie.” She tactfully left the room.

Mr Povey glanced at the fire and the curling red remains of the ticket. Trade was bad; owing to weather and war, destitution was abroad; and he had been doing his utmost for the welfare of the shop; and here was the reward!

Constance’s eyes were full of tears. “Never mind!” she murmured, and went upstairs.

It was all over in a moment.

II

In the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on Duck Bank there was a full and influential congregation. For in those days influential people were not merely content to live in the town where their fathers had lived, without dreaming of country residences and smokeless air—they were content also to believe what their fathers had believed about the beginning and end of all. There was no such thing as the unknowable in those days. The eternal mysteries were as simple as an addition sum; a child could tell you with absolute certainty where you would be and what you would be doing a million years hence, and exactly what God thought of you. Accordingly, every one being of the same mind, every one met on certain occasions in certain places in order to express the universal mind. And in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, for example, instead of a sparse handful of persons disturbingly conscious of being in a minority, as now, a magnificent and proud majority had collected, deeply aware of its rightness and its correctness.

And the minister, backed by minor ministers, knelt and covered his face in the superb mahogany rostrum; and behind him, in what was then still called the “orchestra” (though no musical instruments except the grand organ had sounded in it for decades), the choir knelt and covered their faces; and all around, in the richly painted gallery and on the ground-floor, multitudinous rows of people, in easy circumstances of body and soul, knelt in high pews and covered their faces. And there floated before them, in the intense and prolonged silence, the clear vision of Jehovah on a throne, a God of sixty or so with a moustache and a beard, and a non-committal expression which declined to say whether or not he would require more bloodshed; and this God, destitute of pinions, was surrounded by white-winged creatures that wafted themselves to and fro while chanting; and afar off was an obscene monstrosity, with cloven hoofs and a tail, very dangerous and rude and interfering, who could exist comfortably in the middle of a coal-fire, and who took a malignant and exhaustless pleasure in coaxing you by false pretences into the same fire; but of course you had too much sense to swallow his wicked absurdities. Once a year, for ten minutes by the clock, you knelt thus, in mass, and by meditation convinced yourself that you had too much sense to swallow his wicked absurdities. And the hour was very solemn, the most solemn of all the hours.

Strange that immortal souls should be found with the temerity to reflect upon mundane affairs in that hour! Yet there were undoubtedly such in the congregation; there were perhaps many to whom the vision, if clear, was spasmodic and fleeting. And among them the inhabitants of the Baines family pew! Who would have supposed that Mr Povey, a recent convert from Primitive Methodism in King Street to Wesleyan Methodism on Duck Bank, was dwelling upon window-tickets and the injustice of women, instead of upon his relations with Jehovah and the tailed one? Who would have supposed that the gentle-eyed Constance, pattern of daughters, was risking her eternal welfare by smiling at the tailed one, who, concealing his tail, had assumed the image of Mr Povey? Who would have supposed that Mrs Baines, instead of resolving that Jehovah and not the tailed one should have ultimate rule over her, was resolving that she and not Mr Povey should have ultimate rule over her house and shop? It was a pew-ful that belied its highly satisfactory appearance. (And possibly there were other pew-fuls equally deceptive.)

Sophia alone, in the corner next to the wall, with her beautiful stern face pressed convulsively against her hands, was truly busy with immortal things. Turbulent heart, the violence of her spiritual life had made her older! Never was a passionate, proud girl in a harder case than Sophia! In the splendour of her remorse for a fatal forgetfulness, she had renounced that which she loved and thrown herself into that which she loathed. It was her nature so to do. She had done it haughtily, and not with kindness, but she had done it with the whole force of her will. Constance had been compelled to yield up to her the millinery department, for Sophia’s fingers had a gift of manipulating ribbons and feathers that was beyond Constance. Sophia had accomplished miracles in the millinery. Yes, and she would be utterly polite to customers; but afterwards, when the customers were gone, let mothers, sisters, and Mr Poveys beware of her fiery darts!

But why, when nearly three months had elapsed after her father's death, had she spent more and more time in the shop, secretly aflame with expectancy? Why, when one day a strange traveller entered the shop and announced himself the new representative of Birkinshaws—why had her very soul died away within her and an awful sickness seized her? She knew then that she had been her own deceiver. She recognized and admitted, abasing herself lower than the lowest, that her motive in leaving Miss Chetwynd's and joining the shop had been, at the best, very mixed, very impure. Engaged at Miss Chetwynd's, she might easily have never set eyes on Gerald Scales again. Employed in the shop, she could not fail to meet him. In this light was to be seen the true complexion of the splendour of her remorse. A terrible thought for her! And she could not dismiss it. It contaminated her existence, this thought! And she could confide in no one. She was incapable of showing a wound. Quarter had succeeded quarter, and Gerald Scales was no more heard of. She had sacrificed her life for worse than nothing. She had made her own tragedy. She had killed her father, cheated and shamed herself with a remorse horribly spurious, exchanged content for misery and pride for humiliation—and with it all, Gerald Scales had vanished! She was ruined.

She took to religion, and her conscientious Christian virtues, practised with stern inclemency, were the canker of the family. Thus a year and a half had passed.

And then, on this last day of the year, the second year of her shame and of her heart's widowhood, Mr Scales had reappeared. She had gone casually into the shop and found him talking to her mother and Mr Povey. He had come back to the provincial round and to her. She shook his hand and fled, because she could not have stayed. None had noticed her agitation, for she had held her body as in a vice. She knew the reason neither of his absence nor of his return. She knew nothing. And not a word had been said at meals. And the day had gone and the night come; and now she was in chapel, with Constance by her side and Gerald Scales in her soul! Happy beyond previous conception of happiness! Wretched beyond an unutterable woe! And none knew! What was she to pray for? To what purpose and end ought she to steel herself? Ought she to hope, or ought she to despair? "O God, help me!" she kept whispering to Jehovah whenever the heavenly vision shone through the wrack of her meditation. "O God, help me!" She had a conscience that, when it was in the mood for severity, could be unspeakably cruel to her.

And whenever she looked, with dry, hot eyes, through her gloved fingers, she saw in front of her on the wall a marble tablet inscribed in gilt letters, the cenotaph! She knew all the lines by heart, in their spacious grandiloquence; lines such as:

EVER READY WITH HIS TONGUE HIS PEN AND HIS PURSE
TO HELP THE CHURCH OF HIS FATHERS
IN HER HE LIVED AND IN HER HE DIED
CHERISHING A DEEP AND ARDENT AFFECTION
FOR HIS BELOVED FAITH AND CREED

And again:

HIS SYMPATHIES
EXTENDED BEYOND HIS OWN COMMUNITY
HE WAS ALWAYS TO THE FORE IN GOOD WORKS
AND HE SERVED THE CIRCUIT THE TOWN AND THE
DISTRICT WITH GREAT ACCEPTANCE AND USEFULNESS

Thus had Mr Critchlow's vanity been duly appeased.

As the minutes sped in the breathing silence of the chapel the emotional tension grew tighter; worshippers sighed heavily, or called upon Jehovah for a sign, or merely coughed an invocation. And then at last the clock in the middle of the balcony gave forth the single stroke to which it was limited; the ministers rose, and the congregation after them; and everybody smiled as though it was the millennium, and not simply the new year, that had set in. Then, faintly, through walls and shut windows, came the sound of bells and of steam sirens and whistles. The superintendent minister opened his hymn-book, and the hymn was sung which had been sung in Wesleyan Chapels on New Year's morn since the era of John Wesley himself. The organ finished with a clangour of all its pipes; the minister had a few last words with Jehovah, and nothing was left to do except to persevere in well-doing. The people leaned towards each other across the high backs of the pews.

"A happy New Year!"

"Eh, thank ye! The same to you!"

"Another Watch-Night service over!"

"Eh, yes!" And a sigh.

Then the aisles were suddenly crowded, and there was a good-humoured, optimistic pushing towards the door. In the Corinthian porch occurred a great putting-on of cloaks, ulsters, goloshes, and even pattens, and a great putting-up of umbrellas. And the congregation went out into the whirling snow, dividing into several black, silent-footed processions, down Trafalgar Road, up towards the playground, along the marketplace, and across Duck Square in the direction of St Luke's Square.

Mr Povey was between Mrs Baines and Constance.

"You must take my arm, my pet," said Mrs Baines to Sophia.

Then Mr Povey and Constance waded on in front through the drifts. Sophia balanced that enormous

swaying mass, her mother. Owing to their hoops, she had much difficulty in keeping close to her. Mrs Baines laughed with the complacent ease of obesity, yet a fall would have been almost irremediable for her; and so Sophia had to laugh too. But, though she laughed, God had not helped her. She did not know where she was going, nor what might happen to her next.

"Why, bless us!" exclaimed Mrs Baines, as they turned the corner into King Street. "There's someone sitting on our doorstep!"

There was: a figure swathed in an ulster, a maud over the ulster, and a high hat on the top of all. It could not have been there very long, because it was only speckled with snow. Mr Povey plunged forward.

"It's Mr Scales, of all people!" said Mr Povey.

"Mr Scales!" cried Mrs Baines.

And, "Mr Scales!" murmured Sophia, terribly afraid.

Perhaps she was afraid of miracles. Mr Scales sitting on her mother's doorstep in the middle of the snowy night had assuredly the air of a miracle, of something dreamed in a dream, of something pathetically and impossibly appropriate—"pat," as they say in the Five Towns. But he was a tangible fact there. And years afterwards, in the light of further knowledge of Mr Scales, Sophia came to regard his being on the doorstep as the most natural and characteristic thing in the world. Real miracles never seem to be miracles, and that which at the first blush resembles one usually proves to be an instance of the extremely prosaic.

III

"Is that you, Mrs Baines?" asked Gerald Scales, in a half-witted voice, looking up, and then getting to his feet. "Is this your house? So it is! Well, I'd no idea I was sitting on your doorstep."

He smiled timidly, nay, sheepishly, while the women and Mr Povey surrounded him with their astonished faces under the light of the gas-lamp. Certainly he was very pale.

"But whatever is the matter, Mr Scales?" Mrs Baines demanded in an anxious tone. "Are you ill? Have you been suddenly—"

"Oh no," said the young man lightly. "It's nothing. Only I was set on just now, down there"—he pointed to the depths of King Street.

"Set on!" Mrs Baines repeated, alarmed.

"That makes the fourth case in a week, that we *know* of!" said Mr Povey. "It really is becoming a scandal."

The fact was that, owing to depression of trade, lack of employment, and rigorous weather, public security in the Five Towns was at that period not as perfect as it ought to have been. In the stress of hunger the lower classes were forgetting their manners—and this in spite of the altruistic and noble efforts of their social superiors to relieve the destitution due, of course, to short-sighted improvidence. When (the social superiors were asking in despair) will the lower classes learn to put by for a rainy day? (They might have said a snowy and a frosty day.) It was "really too bad" of the lower classes, when everything that could be done was being done for them, to kill, or even attempt to kill, the goose that lays the golden eggs! And especially in a respectable town! What, indeed, were things coming to? Well, here was Mr Gerald Scales, gentleman from Manchester, a witness and victim to the deplorable moral condition of the Five Towns. What would he think of the Five Towns? The evil and the danger had been a topic of discussion in the shop for a week past, and now it was brought home to them.

"I hope you weren't—" said Mrs Baines, apologetically and sympathetically.

"Oh no!" Mr Scales interrupted her quite gaily. "I managed to beat them off. Only my elbow—"

Meanwhile it was continuing to snow.

"Do come in!" said Mrs Baines.

"I couldn't think of troubling you," said Mr Scales. "I'm all right now, and I can find my way to the Tiger."

"You must come in, if it's only for a minute," said Mrs Baines, with decision. She had to think of the honour of the town.

"You're very kind," said Mr Scales.

The door was suddenly opened from within, and Maggie surveyed them from the height of the two steps.

"A happy New Year, mum, to all of you."

"Thank you, Maggie," said Mrs Baines, and primly added: "The same to you!" And in her own mind she said that Maggie could best prove her desire for a happy new year by contriving in future not to "scamp her corners," and not to break so much crockery.

Sophia, scarce knowing what she did, mounted the steps.

"Mr Scales ought to let our New Year in, my pet," Mrs Baines stopped her.

"Oh, of course, mother!" Sophia concurred with a gasp, springing back nervously.

Mr Scales raised his hat, and duly let the new year, and much snow, into the Baines parlour. And there was a vast deal of stamping of feet, agitating of umbrellas, and shaking of cloaks and ulsters on the doormat in the corner by the harmonium. And Maggie took away an armful of everything snowy, including goloshes, and received instructions to boil milk and to bring "mince." Mr Povey said "B-r-r-r!" and shut the door (which was bordered with felt to stop ventilation); Mrs Baines turned up the gas till it sang, and told Sophia to poke the

fire, and actually told Constance to light the second gas.

Excitement prevailed.

The placidity of existence had been agreeably disturbed (yes, agreeably, in spite of horror at the attack on Mr Scales's elbow) by an adventure. Moreover, Mr Scales proved to be in evening-dress. And nobody had ever worn evening-dress in that house before.

Sophia's blood was in her face, and it remained there, enhancing the vivid richness of her beauty. She was dizzy with a strange and disconcerting intoxication. She seemed to be in a world of unrealities and incredibilities. Her ears heard with indistinctness, and the edges of things and people had a prismatic colouring. She was in a state of ecstatic, unreasonable, inexplicable happiness. All her misery, doubts, despair, rancour, churlishness, had disappeared. She was as softly gentle as Constance. Her eyes were the eyes of a fawn, and her gestures delicious in their modest and sensitive grace. Constance was sitting on the sofa, and, after glancing about as if for shelter, she sat down on the sofa by Constance's side. She tried not to stare at Mr Scales, but her gaze would not leave him. She was sure that he was the most perfect man in the world. A shortish man, perhaps, but a perfect. That such perfection could be was almost past her belief. He excelled all her dreams of the ideal man. His smile, his voice, his hand, his hair—never were such! Why, when he spoke—it was positively music! When he smiled—it was heaven! His smile, to Sophia, was one of those natural phenomena which are so lovely that they make you want to shed tears. There is no hyperbole in this description of Sophia's sensation, but rather an understatement of them. She was utterly obsessed by the unique qualities of Mr Scales. Nothing would have persuaded her that the peer of Mr Scales existed among men, or could possibly exist. And it was her intense and profound conviction of his complete preeminence that gave him, as he sat there in the rocking-chair in her mother's parlour, that air of the unreal and the incredible.

"I stayed in the town on purpose to go to a New Year's party at Mr Lawton's," Mr Scales was saying.

"Ah! So you know Lawyer Lawton!" observed Mrs Baines, impressed, for Lawyer Lawton did not consort with tradespeople. He was jolly with them, and he did their legal business for them, but he was not of them. His friends came from afar.

"My people are old acquaintances of his," said Mr Scales, sipping the milk which Maggie had brought.

"Now, Mr Scales, you must taste my mince. A happy month for every tart you eat, you know," Mrs Baines reminded him.

He bowed. "And it was as I was coming away from there that I got into difficulties." He laughed.

Then he recounted the struggle, which had, however, been brief, as the assailants lacked pluck. He had slipped and fallen on his elbow on the kerb, and his elbow might have been broken, had not the snow been so thick. No, it did not hurt him now; doubtless a mere bruise. It was fortunate that the miscreants had not got the better of him, for he had in his pocket-book a considerable sum of money in notes—accounts paid! He had often thought what an excellent thing it would be if commercials could travel with dogs, particularly in winter. There was nothing like a dog.

"You are fond of dogs?" asked Mr Povey, who had always had a secret but impracticable ambition to keep a dog.

"Yes," said Mr Scales, turning now to Mr Povey.

"Keep one?" asked Mr Povey, in a sporting tone.

"I have a fox-terrier bitch," said Mr Scales, "that took a first at Knutsford; but she's getting old now."

The sexual epithet fell queerly on the room. Mr Povey, being a man of the world, behaved as if nothing had happened; but Mrs Baines's curls protested against this unnecessary coarseness. Constance pretended not to hear. Sophia did not understandingly hear. Mr Scales had no suspicion that he was transgressing a convention by virtue of which dogs have no sex. Further, he had no suspicion of the local fame of Mrs Baines's mince-tarts. He had already eaten more mince-tarts than he could enjoy, before beginning upon hers, and Mrs Baines missed the enthusiasm to which she was habituated from consumers of her pastry.

Mr Povey, fascinated, proceeded in the direction of dogs, and it grew more and more evident that Mr Scales, who went out to parties in evening dress, instead of going in respectable broad-cloth to watch-night services, who knew the great ones of the land, and who kept dogs of an inconvenient sex, was neither an ordinary commercial traveller nor the kind of man to which the Square was accustomed. He came from a different world.

"Lawyer Lawton's party broke up early—at least I mean, considering—" Mrs Baines hesitated.

After a pause Mr Scales replied, "Yes, I left immediately the clock struck twelve. I've a heavy day tomorrow—I mean today."

It was not an hour for a prolonged visit, and in a few minutes Mr Scales was ready again to depart. He admitted a certain feebleness ("wankiness," he playfully called it, being proud of his skill in the dialect), and a burning in his elbow; but otherwise he was quite well—thanks to Mrs Baines's most kind hospitality . . . He really didn't know how he came to be sitting on her doorstep. Mrs Baines urged him, if he met a policeman on his road to the Tiger, to furnish all particulars about the attempted highway robbery, and he said he decidedly would.

He took his leave with distinguished courtliness.

“If I have a moment I shall run in tomorrow morning just to let you know I’m all right,” said he, in the white street.

“Oh, do!” said Constance. Constance’s perfect innocence made her strangely forward at times.

“A happy New Year and many of them!”

“Thanks! Same to you! Don’t get lost.”

“Straight up the Square and first on the right,” called the commonsense of Mr Povey.

Nothing else remained to say, and the visitor disappeared silently in the whirling snow. “Brrr!” murmured Mr Povey, shutting the door. Everybody felt: “What a funny ending of the old year!”

“Sophia, my pet,” Mrs Baines began.

But Sophia had vanished to bed.

“Tell her about her new night-dress,” said Mrs Baines to Constance.

“Yes, mother.”

“I don’t know that I’m so set up with that young man, after all,” Mrs Baines reflected aloud.

“Oh, mother!” Constance protested. “I think he’s just lovely.”

“He never looks you straight in the face,” said Mrs Baines.

“Don’t tell *me*!” laughed Constance, kissing her mother good night. “You’re only on your high horse because he didn’t praise your mince. *I* noticed it.”

IV

“If anybody thinks I’m going to stand the cold in this showroom any longer, they’re mistaken,” said Sophia the next morning loudly, and in her mother’s hearing. And she went down into the shop carrying bonnets.

She pretended to be angry, but she was not. She felt, on the contrary, extremely joyous, and charitable to all the world. Usually she would take pains to keep out of the shop; usually she was preoccupied and stern. Hence her presence on the ground-floor, and her demeanour, excited interest among the three young lady assistants who sat sewing round the stove in the middle of the shop, sheltered by the great piles of shirtings and linseys that fronted the entrance.

Sophia shared Constance’s corner. They had hot bricks under their feet, and fine-knitted wraps on their shoulders. They would have been more comfortable near the stove, but greatness has its penalties. The weather was exceptionally severe. The windows were thickly frosted over, so that Mr Povey’s art in dressing them was quite wasted. And—rare phenomenon!—the doors of the shop were shut. In the ordinary way they were not merely open, but hidden by a display of “cheap lines.” Mr Povey, after consulting Mrs Baines, had decided to close them, foregoing the customary display. Mr Povey had also, in order to get a little warmth into his limbs, personally assisted two casual labourers to scrape the thick frozen snow off the pavement; and he wore his kid mittens. All these things together proved better than the evidence of barometers how the weather nipped.

Mr Scales came about ten o’clock. Instead of going to Mr Povey’s counter, he walked boldly to Constance’s corner, and looked over the boxes, smiling and saluting. Both the girls candidly delighted in his visit. Both blushed; both laughed—without knowing why they laughed. Mr Scales said he was just departing and had slipped in for a moment to thank all of them for their kindness of last night—“or rather this morning.” The girls laughed again at this witticism. Nothing could have been more simple than this speech. Yet it appeared to them magically attractive. A customer entered, a lady; one of the assistants rose from the neighbourhood of the stove, but the daughters of the house ignored the customer; it was part of the etiquette of the shop that customers, at any rate chance customers, should not exist for the daughters of the house, until an assistant had formally drawn attention to them. Otherwise every one who wanted a pennyworth of tape would be expecting to be served by Miss Baines, or Miss Sophia, if Miss Sophia were there. Which would have been ridiculous.

Sophia, glancing sidelong, saw the assistant parleying with the customer; and then the assistant came softly behind the counter and approached the corner.

“Miss Constance, can you spare a minute?” the assistant whispered discreetly.

Constance extinguished her smile for Mr Scales, and, turning away, lighted an entirely different and inferior smile for the customer.

“Good morning, Miss Baines. Very cold, isn’t it?”

“Good morning, Mrs Chatterley. Yes, it is. I suppose you’re getting anxious about those—” Constance stopped.

Sophia was now alone with Mr Scales, for in order to discuss the unnameable freely with Mrs Chatterley her sister was edging up the counter. Sophia had dreamed of a private conversation as something delicious and impossible. But chance had favoured her. She was alone with him. And his neat fair hair and his blue eyes and his delicate mouth were as wonderful to her as ever. He was gentlemanly to a degree that impressed her more than anything had impressed her in her life. And all the proud and aristocratic instinct that was at the base of her character sprang up and seized on his gentlemanliness like a famished animal seizing on food.

“The last time I saw you,” said Mr Scales, in a new tone, “you said you were never in the shop.”

“What? Yesterday? Did I?”
“No, I mean the last time I saw you alone,” said he.
“Oh!” she exclaimed. “It’s just an accident.”
“That’s exactly what you said last time.”
“Is it?”
Was it his manner, or what he said, that flattered her, that intensified her beautiful vivacity?
“I suppose you don’t often go out?” he went on.
“What? In this weather?”
“Any time.”
“I go to chapel,” said she, “and marketing with mother.” There was a little pause. “And to the Free Library.”
“Oh yes. You’ve got a Free Library here now, haven’t you?”
“Yes. We’ve had it over a year.”
“And you belong to it? What do you read?”
“Oh, stories, you know. I get a fresh book out once a week.”
“Saturdays, I suppose?”
“No,” she said. “Wednesdays.” And she smiled. “Usually.”
“It’s Wednesday today,” said he. “Not been already?”
She shook her head. “I don’t think I shall go today. It’s too cold. I don’t *think* I shall venture out today.”
“You must be very fond of reading,” said he.
Then Mr Povey appeared, rubbing his mittened hands. And Mrs Chatterley went.
“I’ll run and fetch mother,” said Constance.

Mrs Baines was very polite to the young man. He related his interview with the police, whose opinion was that he had been attacked by stray members of a gang from Hanbridge. The young lady assistants, with ears cocked, gathered the nature of Mr Scales’s adventure, and were thrilled to the point of questioning Mr Povey about it after Mr Scales had gone. His farewell was marked by much handshaking, and finally Mr Povey ran after him into the Square to mention something about dogs.

At half past one, while Mrs Baines was dozing after dinner, Sophia wrapped herself up, and with a book under her arm went forth into the world, through the shop. She returned in less than twenty minutes. But her mother had already awakened, and was hovering about the back of the shop. Mothers have supernatural gifts.

Sophia nonchalantly passed her and hurried into the parlour, where she threw down her muff and a book and knelt before the fire to warm herself.

Mrs Baines followed her. “Been, to the Library?” questioned Mrs Baines.
“Yes, mother. And it’s simply perishing.”
“I wonder at your going on a day like today. I thought you always went on Thursdays?”
“So I do. But I’d finished my book.”
“What is this?” Mrs Baines picked up the volume, which was covered with black oil-cloth.

She picked it up with a hostile air. For her attitude towards the Free Library was obscurely inimical. She never read anything herself except *The Sunday at Home,* and Constance never read anything except *The Sunday at Home*. There were scriptural commentaries, Dugdale’s Gazetteer, Culpeper’s Herbal, and work by Bunyan and Flavius Josephus in the drawing-room bookcase; also *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. And Mrs Baines, in considering the welfare of her daughters, looked askance at the whole remainder of printed literature. If the Free Library had not formed part of the Famous Wedgwood Institution, which had been opened with immense *éclat* by the semi-divine Gladstone; if the first book had not been ceremoniously “taken out” of the Free Library by the Chief Bailiff in person—a grandfather of stainless renown—Mrs Baines would probably have risked her authority in forbidding the Free Library.

“You needn’t be afraid,” said Sophia, laughing. “It’s Miss Sewell’s *Experience of Life.”*
“A novel, I see,” observed Mrs Baines, dropping the book.

Gold and jewels would probably not tempt a Sophia of these days to read *Experience of Life;* but to Sophia Baines the bland story had the piquancy of the disapproved.

The next day Mrs Baines summoned Sophia into her bedroom.

“Sophia,” she said, trembling, “I shall be glad if you will not walk about the streets with young men until you have my permission.”
The girl blushed violently. “I—I—”
“You were seen in Wedgwood Street,” said Mrs Baines.
“Who’s been gossiping—Mr Critchlow, I suppose?” Sophia exclaimed scornfully.
“No one has been ‘gossiping,’ ” said Mrs Baines.
“Well, if I meet someone by accident in the street, I can’t help it, can I?” Sophia’s voice shook.
“You know what I mean, my child,” said Mrs Baines, with careful calm.
Sophia dashed angrily from the room.

“I like the idea of him having ‘a heavy day’!” Mrs Baines reflected ironically, recalling a phrase which had lodged in her mind. And very vaguely, with an uneasiness scarcely perceptible, she remembered that “he,” and no other, had been in the shop on the day her husband died.

CHAPTER VI

ESCAPADE

I

The uneasiness of Mrs Baines flowed and ebbed, during the next three months, influenced by Sophia's moods. There were days when Sophia was the old Sophia—the forbidding, difficult, waspish, and even hedgehog Sophia. But there were other days on which Sophia seemed to be drawing joy and gaiety and good-will from some secret source, from some fount whose nature and origin none could divine. It was on these days that the uneasiness of Mrs Baines waxed. She had the wildest suspicions; she was almost capable of accusing Sophia of carrying on a clandestine correspondence; she saw Sophia and Gerald Scales deeply and wickedly in love; she saw them with their arms round each other's necks . . . And then she called herself a middle-aged fool, to base such a structure of suspicion on a brief encounter in the street and on an idea, a fancy, a curious and irrational notion! Sophia had a certain streak of pure nobility in that exceedingly heterogeneous thing, her character. Moreover, Mrs Baines watched the posts, and she also watched Sophia—she was not the woman to trust to a streak of pure nobility—and she came to be sure that Sophia's sinfulness, if any, was not such as could be weighed in a balance, or collected together by stealth and then suddenly placed before the girl on a charger.

Still, she would have given much to see inside Sophia's lovely head. Ah! Could she have done so, what sleep-destroying wonders she would have witnessed! By what bright lamps burning in what mysterious grottoes and caverns of the brain would her mature eyes have been dazzled! Sophia was living for months on the exhaustless ardent vitality absorbed during a magical two minutes in Wedgwood Street. She was living chiefly on the flaming fire struck in her soul by the shock of seeing Gerald Scales in the porch of the Wedgwood Institution as she came out of the Free Library with *Experience of Life* tucked into her large astrakhan muff. He had stayed to meet her, then: she knew it! "After all," her heart said, "I must be very beautiful, for I have attracted the pearl of men!" And she remembered her face in the glass. The value and the power of beauty were tremendously proved to her. He, the great man of the world, the handsome and elegant man with a thousand strange friends and a thousand interests far remote from her, had remained in Bursley on the mere chance of meeting her! She was proud, but her pride was drowned in bliss. "I was just looking at this inscription about Mr Gladstone." "So you decided to come out as usual!" "And may I ask what book you have chosen?" These were the phrases she heard, and to which she responded with similar phrases. And meanwhile a miracle of ecstasy had opened—opened like a flower. She was walking along Wedgwood Street, by his side slowly, on the scraped pavements, where marble bulbs of snow had defied the spade and remained. She and he were exactly of the same height, and she kept looking into his face and he into hers. This was all the miracle. Except that she was not walking on the pavement—she was walking on the intangible sward of paradise! Except that the houses had receded and faded, and the passers-by were subtilized into unnoticeable ghosts! Except that her mother and Constance had become phantasmal beings existing at an immense distance!

What had happened? Nothing! The most commonplace occurrence! The eternal cause had picked up a commercial traveller (it might have been a clerk or curate, but it in fact was a commercial traveller), and endowed him with all the glorious, unique, incredible attributes of a god, and planted him down before Sophia in order to produce the eternal effect. A miracle performed specially for Sophia's benefit! No one else in Wedgwood Street saw the god walking along by her side. No one else saw anything but a simple commercial traveller. Yes, the most commonplace occurrence!

Of course at the corner of the street he had to go. "Till next time!" he murmured. And fire came out of his eyes and lighted in Sophia's lovely head those lamps which Mrs Baines was mercifully spared from seeing. And he had shaken hands and raised his hat. Imagine a god raising his hat! And he went off on two legs, precisely like a dashing little commercial traveller.

And, escorted by the equivocal Angel of Eclipses, she had turned into King Street, and arranged her face, and courageously met her mother. Her mother had not at first perceived the unusual; for mothers, despite their reputation to the contrary, really are the blindest creatures. Sophia, the naïve ninny, had actually

supposed that her walking along a hundred yards of pavement with a god by her side was not going to excite remark! What a delusion! It is true, certainly, that no one saw the god by direct vision. But Sophia's cheeks, Sophia's eyes, the curve of Sophia's neck as her soul yearned towards the soul of the god—these phenomena were immeasurably more notable than Sophia guessed. An account of them, in a modified form to respect Mrs Baines's notorious dignity, had healed the mother of her blindness and led to that characteristic protest from her, "I shall be glad if you will not walk about the streets with young men," etc.

When the period came for the reappearance of Mr Scales, Mrs Baines outlined a plan, and when the circular announcing the exact time of his arrival was dropped into the letter-box, she formulated the plan in detail. In the first place, she was determined to be indisposed and invisible herself, so that Mr Scales might be foiled in any possible design to renew social relations in the parlour. In the second place, she flattered Constance with a single hint—oh, the vaguest and briefest!—and Constance understood that she was not to quit the shop on the appointed morning. In the third place, she invented a way of explaining to Mr Povey that the approaching advent of Gerald Scales must not be mentioned. And in the fourth place, she deliberately made appointments for Sophia with two millinery customers in the showroom, so that Sophia might be imprisoned in the showroom.

Having thus left nothing to chance, she told herself that she was a foolish woman full of nonsense. But this did not prevent her from putting her lips together firmly and resolving that Mr Scales should have no finger in the pie of *her* family. She had acquired information concerning Mr Scales, at second hand, from Lawyer Pratt. More than this, she posed the question in a broader form—why should a young girl be permitted any interest in any young man whatsoever? The everlasting purpose had made use of Mrs Baines and cast her off, and, like most persons in a similar situation, she was, unconsciously and quite honestly, at odds with the everlasting purpose.

II

On the day of Mr Scales's visit to the shop to obtain orders and money on behalf of Birkinshaws, a singular success seemed to attend the machinations of Mrs Baines. With Mr Scales punctuality was not an inveterate habit, and he had rarely been known, in the past, to fulfil exactly the prophecy of the letter of advice concerning his arrival. But that morning his promptitude was unexampled. He entered the shop, and by chance Mr Povey was arranging unshrinkable flannels in the doorway. The two youngish little men talked amiably about flannels, dogs, and quarter-day (which was just past), and then Mr Povey led Mr Scales to his desk in the dark corner behind the high pile of twills, and paid the quarterly bill, in notes and gold—as always; and then Mr Scales offered for the august inspection of Mr Povey all that Manchester had recently invented for the temptation of drapers, and Mr Povey gave him an order which, if not reckless, was nearer "handsome" than "good." During the process Mr Scales had to go out of the shop twice or three times in order to bring in from his barrow at the kerbstone certain small black boxes edged with brass. On none of these excursions did Mr Scales glance wantonly about him in satisfaction of the lust of the eye. Even if he had permitted himself this freedom he would have seen nothing more interesting than three young lady assistants seated round the stove and sewing with pricked fingers from which the chilblains were at last deciding to depart. When Mr Scales had finished writing down the details of the order with his ivory-handled stylo, and repacked his boxes, he drew the interview to a conclusion after the manner of a capable commercial traveller; that is to say, he implanted in Mr Povey his opinion that Mr Povey was a wise, a shrewd, and an upright man, and that the world would be all the better for a few more like him. He inquired for Mrs Baines, and was deeply pained to hear of her indisposition while finding consolation in the assurance that the Misses Baines were well. Mr Povey was on the point of accompanying the pattern of commercial travellers to the door, when two customers simultaneously came in—ladies. One made straight for Mr Povey, whereupon Mr Scales parted from him at once, it being a universal maxim in shops that even the most distinguished commercial shall not hinder the business of even the least distinguished customer. The other customer had the effect of causing Constance to pop up from her cloistral corner. Constance had been there all the time, but of course, though she heard the remembered voice, her maidenliness had not permitted that she should show herself to Mr Scales.

Now, as he was leaving, Mr Scales saw her, with her agreeable snub nose and her kind, simple eyes. She was requesting the second customer to mount to the showroom, where was Miss Sophia. Mr Scales hesitated a moment, and in that moment Constance, catching his eye, smiled upon him, and nodded. What else could she do? Vaguely aware though she was that her mother was not "set up" with Mr Scales, and even feared the possible influence of the young man on Sophia, she could not exclude him from her general benevolence towards the universe. Moreover, she liked him; she liked him very much and thought him a very fine specimen of a man.

He left the door and went across to her. They shook hands and opened a conversation instantly; for Constance, while retaining all her modesty, had lost all her shyness in the shop, and could chatter with anybody. She sidled towards her corner, precisely as Sophia had done on another occasion, and Mr Scales put his chin over the screening boxes, and eagerly prosecuted the conversation.

There was absolutely nothing in the fact of the interview itself to cause alarm to a mother, nothing to render futile the precautions of Mrs Baines on behalf of the flower of Sophia's innocence. And yet it held danger for Mrs Baines, all unconscious in her parlour. Mrs Baines could rely utterly on Constance not to be led away by the dandiacal charms of Mr Scales (she knew in what quarter sat the wind for Constance); in her plan she had forgotten nothing, except Mr Povey; and it must be said that she could not possibly have foreseen the effect on the situation of Mr Povey's character.

Mr Povey, attending to his customer, had noticed the bright smile of Constance on the traveller, and his heart did not like it. And when he saw the lively gestures of a Mr Scales in apparently intimate talk with a Constance hidden behind boxes, his uneasiness grew into fury. He was a man capable of black and terrible furies. Outwardly insignificant, possessing a mind as little as his body, easily abashed, he was none the less a,very susceptible young man, soon offended, proud, vain, and obscurely passionate. You might offend Mr Povey without guessing it, and only discover your sin when Mr Povey had done something too decisive as a result of it.

The reason of his fury was jealousy. Mr Povey had made great advances since the death of John Baines. He had consolidated his position, and he was in every way a personage of the first importance. His misfortune was that he could never translate his importance, or his sense of his importance, into terms of outward demeanour. Most people, had they been told that Mr Povey was seriously aspiring to enter the Baines family, would have laughed. But they would have been wrong. To laugh at Mr Povey was invariably wrong. Only Constance knew what inroads he had effected upon her.

The customer went, but Mr Scales did not go. Mr Povey, free to reconnoitre, did so. From the shadow of the till he could catch glimpses of Constance's blushing, vivacious face. She was obviously absorbed in Mr Scales. She and he had a tremendous air of intimacy. And the murmur of their chatter continued. Their chatter was nothing, and about nothing, but Mr Povey imagined that they were exchanging eternal vows. He endured Mr Scales's odious freedom until it became insufferable, until it deprived him of all his self-control; and then he retired into his cutting-out room. He meditated there in a condition of insanity for perhaps a minute, and excogitated a device. Dashing back into the shop, he spoke up, half across the shop, in a loud, curt tone:

"Miss Baines, your mother wants you at once."

He was launched on the phrase before he noticed that during his absence, Sophia had descended from the showroom and joined her sister and Mr Scales. The danger and scandal were now less, he perceived, but he was glad he had summoned Constance away, and he was in a state to despise consequences.

The three chatterers, startled, looked at Mr Povey, who left the shop abruptly. Constance could do nothing but obey the call.

She met him at the door of the cutting-room in the passage leading to the parlour.

"Where is mother? In the parlour?" Constance inquired innocently.

There was a dark flush on Mr Povey's face. "If you wish to know," said he in a hard voice, "she hasn't asked for you and she doesn't want you."

He turned his back on her, and retreated into his lair.

"Then what—?" she began, puzzled.

He fronted her. "Haven't you been gabbling long enough with that jackanapes?" he spit at her. There were tears in his eyes.

Constance, though without experience in these matters, comprehended. She comprehended perfectly and immediately. She ought to have put Mr Povey into his place. She ought to have protested with firm, dignified finality against such a ridiculous and monstrous outrage as that which Mr Povey had committed. Mr Povey ought to have been ruined for ever in her esteem and in her heart. But she hesitated.

"And only last Sunday—afternoon," Mr Povey blubbered.

(Not that anything overt had occurred, or been articulately said, between them last Sunday afternoon. But they had been alone together, and had each witnessed strange and disturbing matters in the eyes of the other.)

Tears now fell suddenly from Constance's eyes. "You ought to be ashamed—" she stammered.

Still, the tears were in her eyes, and in his too. What he or she merely said, therefore, was of secondary importance.

Mrs Baines, coming from the kitchen, and hearing Constance's voice, burst upon the scene, which silenced her. Parents are sometimes silenced. She found Sophia and Mr Scales in the shop.

III

That afternoon Sophia, too busy with her own affairs to notice anything abnormal in the relations between her mother and Constance, and quite ignorant that there had been an unsuccessful plot against her, went forth to call upon Miss Chetwynd, with whom she had remained very friendly: she considered that she and Miss Chetwynd formed an aristocracy of intellect, and the family indeed tacitly admitted this. She practised no secrecy in her departure from the shop; she merely dressed, in her second-best hoop, and went, having been ready at any moment to tell her mother, if her mother caught her and inquired, that she was going to see Miss

Chetwynd. And she did go to see Miss Chetwynd, arriving at the house-school, which lay amid trees on the road to Turnhill, just beyond the turnpike, at precisely a quarter-past four. As Miss Chetwynd's pupils left at four o'clock, and as Miss Chetwynd invariably took a walk immediately afterwards, Sophia was able to contain her surprise upon being informed that Miss Chetwynd was not in. She had not intended that Miss Chetwynd should be in.

She turned off to the right, up the side road which, starting from the turnpike, led in the direction of Moorthorne and Red Cow, two mining villages. Her heart beat with fear as she began to follow that road, for she was upon a terrific adventure. What most frightened her, perhaps, was her own astounding audacity. She was alarmed by something within herself which seemed to be no part of herself and which produced in her curious, disconcerting, fleeting impressions of unreality.

In the morning she had heard the voice of Mr Scales from the showroom—that voice whose even distant murmur caused creepings of the skin in her back. And she had actually stood on the counter in front of the window in order to see down perpendicularly into the Square; by so doing she had had a glimpse of the top of his luggage on a barrow, and of the crown of his hat occasionally when he went outside to tempt Mr Povey. She might have gone down into the shop—there was no slightest reason why she should not; three months had elapsed since the name of Mr Scales had been mentioned, and her mother had evidently forgotten the trifling incident of New Year's Day—but she was incapable of descending the stairs! She went to the head of the stairs and peeped through the balustrade—and she could not get farther. For nearly a hundred days those extraordinary lamps had been brightly burning in her head; and now the light-giver had come again, and her feet would not move to the meeting; now the moment had arrived for which alone she had lived, and she could not seize it as it passed! "Why don't I go downstairs?" she asked herself. "Am I afraid to meet him?"

The customer sent up by Constance had occupied the surface of her life for ten minutes, trying on hats; and during this time she was praying wildly that Mr Scales might not go, and asserting that it was impossible he should go without at least asking for her. Had she not counted the days to this day? When the customer left, Sophia followed her downstairs, and saw Mr Scales chatting with Constance. All her self-possession instantly returned to her, and she joined them with a rather mocking smile. After Mr Povey's strange summons had withdrawn Constance from the corner, Mr Scales's tone had changed; it had thrilled her. "You are *you*," it had said, "there is you—and there is the rest of the universe!" Then he had not forgotten; she had lived in his heart; she had not for three months been the victim of her own fancies! . . . She saw him put a piece of folded white paper on the top edge of the screening box and flick it down to her. She blushed scarlet, staring at it as it lay on the counter. He said nothing, and she could not speak . . . He had prepared that paper, then, beforehand, on the chance of being able to give it to her! This thought was exquisite but full of terror. "I must really go," he had said, lamely, with emotion in his voice, and he had gone—like that! And she put the piece of paper into the pocket of her apron, and hastened away. She had not even seen, as she turned up the stairs, her mother standing by the till—that spot which was the conning-tower of the whole shop. She ran, ran, breathless to the bedroom . . .

"I am a wicked girl!" she said quite frankly, on the road to the rendezvous. "It is a dream that I am going to meet him. It cannot be true. There is time to go back. If I go back I am safe. I have simply called at Miss Chetwynd's and she wasn't in, and no one can say a word. But if I go on—if I'm seen! What a fool I am to go on!"

And she went on, impelled by, amongst other things, an immense, naïve curiosity, and the vanity which the bare fact of his note had excited. The Loop railway was being constructed at that period, and hundreds of navvies were at work on it between Bursley and Turnhill. When she came to the new bridge over the cutting, he was there, as he had written that he would be.

They were very nervous, they greeted each other stiffly and as though they had met then for the first time that day. Nothing was said about his note, nor about her response to it. Her presence was treated by both of them as a basic fact of the situation which it would be well not to disturb by comment. Sophia could not hide her shame, but her shame only aggravated the stinging charm of her beauty. She was wearing a hard Amazonian hat, with a lifted veil, the final word of fashion that spring in the Five Towns; her face, beaten by the fresh breeze, shone rosily; her eyes glittered under the dark hat, and the violent colours of her Victorian frock—green and crimson—could not spoil those cheeks. If she looked earthwards, frowning, she was the more adorable so. He had come down the clayey incline from the unfinished red bridge to welcome her, and when the salutations were over they stood still, he gazing apparently at the horizon and she at the yellow marl round the edges of his boots. The encounter was as far away from Sophia's ideal conception as Manchester from Venice.

"So this is the new railway!" said she.

"Yes," said he. "This is your new railway. You can see it better from the bridge."

"But it's very sludgy up there," she objected with a pout.

"Further on it's quite dry," he reassured her.

From the bridge they had a sudden view of a raw gash in the earth; and hundreds of men were crawling about in it, busy with minute operations, like flies in a great wound. There was a continuous rattle of picks, resembling a muffled shower of hail, and in the distance a tiny locomotive was leading a procession of tiny

waggons.

"And those are the navvies!" she murmured.

The unspeakable doings of the navvies in the Five Towns had reached even her: how they drank and swore all day on Sundays, how their huts and houses were dens of the most appalling infamy, how they were the curse of a God-fearing and respectable district! She and Gerald Scales glanced down at these dangerous beasts of prey in their yellow corduroys and their open shirts revealing hairy chests. No doubt they both thought how inconvenient it was that railways could not be brought into existence without the aid of such revolting and swinish animals. They glanced down from the height of their nice decorum and felt the powerful attraction of similar superior manners. The manners of the navvies were such that Sophia could not even regard them, nor Gerald Scales permit her to regard them, without blushing.

In a united blush they turned away, up the gradual slope. Sophia knew no longer what she was doing. For some minutes she was as helpless as though she had been in a balloon with him.

"I got my work done early," he said; and added complacently, "As a matter of fact I've had a pretty good day."

She was reassured to learn that he was not neglecting his duties. To be philandering with a commercial traveller who has finished a good day's work seemed less shocking than dalliance with a neglecter of business; it seemed indeed, by comparison, respectable.

"It must be very interesting," she said primly.

"What, my trade?"

"Yes. Always seeing new places and so on."

"In a way it is," he admitted judicially. "But I can tell you it was much more agreeable being in Paris."

"Oh! Have you been in Paris?"

"Lived there for nearly two years," he said carelessly. Then, looking at her, "Didn't you notice I never came for a long time?"

"I didn't know you were in Paris," she evaded him.

"I went to start a sort of agency for Birkinshaws," he said.

"I suppose you talk French like anything."

"Of course one has to talk French," said he. "I learnt French when I was a child from a governess—my uncle made me—but I forgot most of it at school, and at the Varsity you never learn anything—precious little, anyhow! Certainly not French!"

She was deeply impressed. He was a much greater personage than she had guessed. It had never occurred to her that commercial travellers had to go to a university to finish their complex education. And then, Paris! Paris meant absolutely nothing to her but pure, impossible unattainable romance. And he had been there! The clouds of glory were around him. He was a hero, dazzling. He had come to her out of another world. He was her miracle. He was almost too miraculous to be true.

She, living her humdrum life at the shop! And he, elegant, brilliant, coming from far cities! They together, side by side, strolling up the road towards the Moorthorn ridge! There was nothing quite like this in the stories of Miss Sewell.

"Your uncle . . . ?" she questioned vaguely.

"Yes, Mr Boldero. He's a partner in Birkinshaws."

"Oh!"

"You've heard of him? He's a great Wesleyan."

"Oh yes," she said. "When we had the Wesleyan Conference here, he—"

"He's always very great at Conferences," said Gerald Scales.

"I didn't know he had anything to do with Birkinshaws."

"He isn't a working partner of course," Mr Scales explained. "But he means me to be one. I have to learn the business from the bottom. So now you understand why I'm a traveller."

"I see," she said, still more deeply impressed.

"I'm an orphan," said Gerald. "And Uncle Boldero took me in hand when I was three."

"I *see*!" she repeated.

It seemed strange to her that Mr Scales should be a Wesleyan—just like herself. She would have been sure that he was "Church." Her notions of Wesleyanism, with her notions of various other things, were sharply modified.

"Now tell me about you," Mr Scales suggested.

"Oh! I'm nothing!" she burst out.

The exclamation was perfectly sincere. Mr Scales's disclosures concerning himself, while they excited her, discouraged her.

"You're the finest girl I've ever met, anyhow," said Mr Scales with gallant emphasis, and he dug his stick into the soft ground.

She blushed and made no answer.

They walked on in silence, each wondering apprehensively what might happen next.

Suddenly Mr Scales stopped at a dilapidated low brick wall, built in a circle, close to the side of the road.

“I expect that’s an old pit-shaft,” said he.

“Yes, I expect it is.”

He picked up a rather large stone and approached the wall.

“Be careful!” she enjoined him.

“Oh! It’s all right,” he said lightly. “Let’s listen. Come near and listen.”

She reluctantly obeyed, and he threw the stone over the dirty ruined wall, the top of which was about level with his hat. For two or three seconds there was no sound. Then a faint reverberation echoed from the depths of the shaft And on Sophia’s brain arose dreadful images of the ghosts of miners wandering for ever in subterranean passages, far, far beneath. The noise of the falling stone had awakened for her the secret terrors of the earth. She could scarcely even look at the wall without a spasm of fear.

“How strange,” said Mr Scales, a little awe in his voice, too, “that that should be left there like that! I suppose it’s very deep.”

“Some of them are,” she trembled.

“I must just have a look,” he said, and put his hands on the top of the wall.

“Come away!” she cried.

“Oh! It’s all right!” he said again, soothingly. “The wall’s as firm as a rock.” And he took a slight spring and looked over.

She shrieked loudly. She saw him at the distant bottom of the shaft, mangled, drowning. The ground seemed to quake under her feet. A horrible sickness seized her. And she shrieked again. Never had she guessed that existence could be such a pain.

He slid down from the wall and turned to her. “No bottom to be seen!” he said. Then, observing her transformed face, he came close to her, with a superior masculine smile. “Silly little thing!” he said coaxingly, endearingly, putting forth all his power to charm.

He perceived at once that he had miscalculated the effects of his action. Her alarm changed swiftly to angry offence. She drew back with a haughty gesture, as if he had intended actually to touch her. Did he suppose, because she chanced to be walking with him, that he had the right to address her familiarly, to tease her, to call her “silly little thing” and to put his face against hers? She resented his freedom with quick and passionate indignation.

She showed him her proud back and nodding head and wrathful skirts; and hurried off without a word, almost running. As for him, he was so startled by unexpected phenomena that he did nothing for a moment—merely stood looking and feeling foolish.

Then she heard him in pursuit. She was too proud to stop or even to reduce her speed.

“I didn’t mean to—” he muttered behind her.

No recognition from her.

“I suppose I ought to apologize,” he said.

“I should just think you ought,” she answered, furious.

“Well, I do!” said he. “Do stop a minute.”

“I’ll thank you not to follow me, Mr Scales.” She paused and scorched him with her displeasure. Then she went forward. And her heart was in torture because it could not persuade her to remain with him, and smile and forgive, and win his smile.

“I shall write to you,” he shouted down the slope.

She kept on, the ridiculous child. But the agony she had suffered as he clung to the frail wall was not ridiculous, nor her dark vision of the mine, nor her tremendous indignation when, after disobeying her, he forgot that she was a queen. To her the scene was sublimely tragic. Soon she had recrossed the bridge, but not the same she! So this was the end of the incredible adventure!

When she reached the turnpike she thought of her mother and of Constance. She had completely forgotten them; for a space they had utterly ceased to exist for her.

IV

“You’ve been out, Sophia?” said Mrs Baines in the parlour, questioningly. Sophia had taken off her hat and mantle hurriedly in the cutting-out room, for she was in danger of being late for tea; but her hair and face showed traces of the March breeze. Mrs Baines, whose stoutness seemed to increase, sat in the rocking-chair with a number of *The Sunday at Home* in her hand. Tea was set.

“Yes, mother. I called to see Miss Chetwynd.”

“I wish you’d tell me when you are going out.”

“I looked all over for you before I started.”

“No, you didn’t, for I haven’t stirred from this room since four o’clock . . . You should not say things like that,” Mrs Baines added in a gentler tone.

Mrs Baines had suffered much that day. She knew that she was in an irritable, nervous state, and therefore she said to herself, in her quality of wise woman, “I must watch myself. I mustn’t let myself go.” And she thought how reasonable she was. She did not guess that all her gestures betrayed her; nor did it occur to her

that few things are more galling than the spectacle of a person, actuated by lofty motives, obviously trying to be kind and patient under what he considers to be extreme provocation.

Maggie blundered up the kitchen stairs with the teapot and hot toast; and so Sophia had an excuse for silence. Sophia too had suffered much, suffered excruciatingly; she carried at that moment a whole tragedy in her young soul, unaccustomed to such burdens. Her attitude towards her mother was half fearful and half defiant; it might be summed up in the phrase which she had repeated again and again under her breath on the way home, "Well, mother can't kill me!"

Mrs Baines put down the blue-covered magazine and twisted her rocking-chair towards the table.

"You can pour out the tea," said Mrs Baines.

"Where's Constance?"

"She's not very well. She's lying down."

"Anything the matter with her?"

"No."

This was inaccurate. Nearly everything was the matter with Constance, who had never been less Constance than during that afternoon. But Mrs Baines had no intention of discussing Constance's love-affairs with Sophia. The less said to Sophia about love, the better! Sophia was excitable enough already!

They sat opposite to each other, on either side of the fire—the monumental matron whose black bodice heavily overhung the table, whose large rounded face was creased and wrinkled by what seemed countless years of joy and disillusion; and the young, slim girl, so fresh, so virginal, so ignorant, with all the pathos of an unsuspecting victim about to be sacrificed to the minotaur of Time. They both ate hot toast, with careless haste, in silence, preoccupied, worried, and outwardly nonchalant.

"And what has Miss Chetwynd got to say?" Mrs Baines inquired.

"She wasn't in."

Here was a blow for Mrs Baines, whose suspicions about Sophia, driven off by her certainties regarding Constance, suddenly sprang forward in her mind, and prowled to and fro like a band of tigers.

Still, Mrs Baines was determined to be calm and careful. "Oh! What time did you call?"

"I don't know. About half-past four." Sophia finished her tea quickly, and rose. "Shall I tell Mr Povey he can come?"

(Mr Povey had his tea after the ladies of the house.)

"Yes, if you will stay in the shop till I come. Light me the gas before you go."

Sophia took the wax taper from a vase on the mantelpiece, stuck it in the fire and lit the gas, which exploded in its crystal cloister with a mild report.

"What's all that clay on your boots, child?" asked Mrs Baines.

"Clay?" repeated Sophia, staring foolishly at her boots.

"Yes," said Mrs Baines. "It looks like marl. Where on earth have you been?"

She interrogated her daughter with an upward gaze, frigid and unconsciously hostile, through her gold-rimmed glasses.

"I must have picked it up on the roads," said Sophia, and hastened to the door.

"Sophia!"

"Yes, mother."

"Shut the door."

Sophia unwillingly shut the door which she had half opened.

"Come here."

Sophia obeyed, with falling lip.

"You are deceiving me, Sophia," said Mrs Baines, with fierce solemnity. "Where have you been this afternoon?"

Sophia's foot was restless on the carpet behind the table. "I haven't been anywhere," she murmured glumly.

"Have you seen young Scales?"

"Yes," said Sophia with grimness, glancing audaciously for an instant at her mother. ("She can't kill me: She can't kill me," her heart muttered. And she had youth and beauty in her favour, while her mother was only a fat middle-aged woman. "She can't kill me," said her heart, with the trembling, cruel insolence of the mirror-flattered child.)

"How came you to meet him?"

No answer.

"Sophia, you heard what I said!"

Still no answer. Sophia looked down at the table. ("She can't kill me.")

"If you are going to be sullen, I shall have to suppose the worst," said Mrs Baines.

Sophia kept her silence.

"Of course," Mrs Baines resumed, "if you choose to be wicked, neither your mother nor any one else can stop you. There are certain things I *can* do, and these I *shall* do . . . Let me warn you that young Scales is a thoroughly bad lot. I know all about him. He has been living a wild life abroad, and if it hadn't been that his uncle is a partner in Birkinshaws, they would never have taken him on again." A pause. "I hope that one day

you will be a happy wife, but you are much too young yet to be meeting young men, and nothing would ever induce me to let you have anything to do with this Scales. I won't have it. In future you are not to go out alone. You understand me?"

Sophia kept silence.

"I hope you will be in a better frame of mind tomorrow. I can only hope so. But if you aren't, I shall take very severe measures. You think you can defy me. But you never were more mistaken in your life. I don't want to see any more of you now. Go and tell Mr Povey; and call Maggie for the fresh tea. You make me almost glad that your father died even as he did. He has, at any rate, been spared this."

Those words "died even as he did" achieved the intimidation of Sophia. They seemed to indicate that Mrs Baines, though she had magnanimously never mentioned the subject to Sophia, knew exactly how the old man had died. Sophia escaped from the room in fear, cowed. Nevertheless, her thought was, "She hasn't killed me. I made up my mind I wouldn't talk, and I didn't."

In the evening, as she sat in the shop primly and sternly sewing at hats—while her mother wept in secret on the first floor, and Constance remained hidden on the second—Sophia lived over again the scene at the old shaft; but she lived it differently, admitting that she had been wrong, guessing by instinct that she had shown a foolish mistrust of love. As she sat in the shop, she adopted just the right attitude and said just the right things. Instead of being a silly baby she was an accomplished and dazzling woman, then. When customers came in, and the young lady assistants unobtrusively turned higher the central gas, according to the *régime* of the shop, it was really extraordinary that they could not read in the heart of the beautiful Miss Baines the words which blazed there: "*You're the finest girl I ever met*," and "*I shall write to you*." The young lady assistants had their notions as to both Constance and Sophia, but the truth, at least as regarded Sophia, was beyond the flight of their imaginations. When eight o'clock struck and she gave the formal order for dust-sheets, the shop being empty, they never supposed that she was dreaming about posts and plotting how to get hold of the morning's letters before Mr Povey.

CHAPTER VII

A DEFEAT

I

It was during the month of June that Aunt Harriet came over from Axe to spend a few days with her little sister, Mrs Baines. The railway between Axe and the Five Towns had not yet been opened; but even if it had been opened Aunt Harriet would probably not have used it. She had always travelled from Axe to Bursley in the same vehicle, a small waggonette which she hired from Bratt's livery stables at Axe, driven by a coachman who thoroughly understood the importance, and the peculiarities, of Aunt Harriet.

Mrs Baines had increased in stoutness, so that now Aunt Harriet had very little advantage over her, physically. But the moral ascendancy of the elder still persisted. The two vast widows shared Mrs Baines's bedroom, spending much of their time there in long, hushed conversations—interviews from which Mrs Baines emerged with the air of one who had received enlightenment and Aunt Harriet with the air of one who has rendered it. The pair went about together, in the shop, the showroom, the parlour, the kitchen, and also into the town, addressing each other as "Sister," "Sister." Everywhere it was "sister," "sister," "my sister," "your dear mother," "your Aunt Harriet." They referred to each other as oracular sources of wisdom and good taste. Respectability stalked abroad when they were afoot. The whole Square wriggled uneasily as though God's eye were peculiarly upon it. The meals in the parlour became solemn collations, at which shone the best silver and the finest diaper, but from which gaiety and naturalness seemed to be banished. (I say "seemed" because it cannot be doubted that Aunt Harriet was natural, and there were moments when she possibly considered herself to be practising gaiety—a gaiety more desolating than her severity.) The younger generation was extinguished, pressed flat and lifeless under the ponderosity of the widows.

Mr Povey was not the man to be easily flattened by ponderosity of any kind, and his suppression was a striking proof of the prowess of the widows; who, indeed, went over Mr Povey like traction-engines, with the sublime unconsciousness of traction-engines, leaving an inanimate object in the road behind them, and scarce aware even of the jolt. Mr Povey hated Aunt Harriet, but, lying crushed there in the road, how could he rebel?

He felt all the time that Aunt Harriet was adding him up, and reporting the result at frequent intervals to Mrs Baines in the bedroom. He felt that she knew everything about him—even to those tears which had been in his eyes. He felt that he could hope to do nothing right for Aunt Harriet, that absolute perfection in the performance of duty would make no more impression on her than a caress on the fly-wheel of a traction-engine. Constance, the dear Constance, was also looked at askance. There was nothing in Aunt Harriet's demeanour to her that you could take hold of, but there was emphatically something that you could not take hold of—a hint, an inkling, that insinuated to Constance, "Have a care, lest peradventure you become the second cousin of the scarlet woman."

Sophia was petted. Sophia was liable to be playfully tapped by Aunt Harriet's thimble when Aunt Harriet was hemming dusters (for the elderly lady could lift a duster to her own dignity). Sophia was called on two separate occasions, "My little butterfly." And Sophia was entrusted with the trimming of Aunt Harriet's new summer bonnet. Aunt Harriet deemed that Sophia was looking pale. As the days passed, Sophia's pallor was emphasized by Aunt Harriet until it developed into an article of faith, to which you were compelled to subscribe on pain of excommunication. Then dawned the day when Aunt Harriet said, staring at Sophia as an affectionate aunt may: "That child would do with a change." And then there dawned another day when Aunt Harriet, staring at Sophia compassionately, as a devoted aunt may, said: "It's a pity that child can't have a change." And Mrs Baines also stared and said: "It is."

And on another day Aunt Harriet said: "I've been wondering whether my little Sophia would care to come and keep her old aunt company a while."

There were few things for which Sophia would have cared less. The girl swore to herself angrily that she would not go, that no allurement would induce her to go. But she was in a net; she was in the meshes of family correctness. Do what she would, she could not invent a reason for not going. Certainly she could not tell her aunt that she merely did not want to go. She was capable of enormities, but not of that. And then began Aunt Harriet's intricate preparations for going. Aunt Harriet never did anything simply. And she could not be hurried. Seventy-two hours before leaving she had to commence upon her trunk; but first the trunk had to be wiped by Maggie with a damp cloth under the eye and direction of Aunt Harriet. And the liveryman at Axe had to be written to, and the servants at Axe written to, and the weather prospects weighed and considered. And somehow, by the time these matters were accomplished, it was tacitly understood that Sophia should accompany her kind aunt into the bracing moorland air of Axe. No smoke at Axe! No stuffiness at Axe! The spacious existence of a wealthy widow in a residential town with a low death-rate and famous scenery! "Have you packed your box, Sophia?" No, she had not. "Well, I will come and help you."

Impossible to bear up against the momentum of a massive body like Aunt Harriet's! It was irresistible.

The day of departure came, throwing the entire household into a commotion. Dinner was put a quarter of an hour earlier than usual so that Aunt Harriet might achieve Axe at her accustomed hour of tea. After dinner Maggie was the recipient of three amazing muslin aprons, given with a regal gesture. And the trunk and the box were brought down, and there was a slight odour of black kid gloves in the parlour. The waggonette was due and the waggonette appeared ("I can always rely upon Bladen!" said Aunt Harriet), and the door was opened, and Bladen, stiff on his legs, descended from the box and touched his hat to Aunt Harriet as she filled up the doorway.

"Have you baited, Bladen?" asked she.

"Yes'm," said he, assuringly.

Bladen and Mr Povey carried out the trunk and the box, and Constance charged herself with parcels which she bestowed in the corners of the vehicle according to her aunt's prescription; it was like stowing the cargo of a vessel.

"Now, Sophia, my chuck!" Mrs Baines called up the stairs. And Sophia came slowly downstairs. Mrs Baines offered her mouth. Sophia glanced at her.

"You needn't think I don't see why you're sending me away!" exclaimed Sophia in a hard, furious voice, with glistening eyes. "I'm not so blind as all that!" She kissed her mother—nothing but a contemptuous peck. Then, as she turned away she added: "But you let Constance do just as she likes!"

This was her sole bitter comment on the episode, but into it she put all the profound bitterness accumulated during many mutinous nights.

Mrs Baines concealed a sigh. The explosion certainly disturbed her. She had hoped that the smooth surface of things would not be ruffled.

Sophia bounced out. And the assembly, including several urchins, watched with held breath while Aunt Harriet, after having bid majestic good-byes, got on to the step and introduced herself through the doorway of the waggonette into the interior of the vehicle; it was an operation like threading a needle with cotton too thick. Once within, her hoops distended in sudden release, filling the waggonette. Sophia followed, agilely.

As, with due formalities, the equipage drove off, Mrs Baines gave another sigh, one of relief. The sisters had won. She could now await the imminent next advent of Mr Gerald Scales with tranquillity.

II

Those singular words of Sophia's, "But you let Constance do just as she likes," had disturbed Mrs Baines more than was at first apparent. They worried her like a late fly in autumn. For she had said nothing to anyone about Constance's case. Mrs Maddack of course excepted. She had instinctively felt that she could not show the slightest leniency towards the romantic impulses of her elder daughter without seeming unjust to the younger, and she had acted accordingly. On the memorable morn of Mr Povey's acute jealousy, she had, temporarily at any rate, slaked the fire, banked it down, and hidden it; and since then no word had passed as to the state of Constance's heart. In the great peril to be feared from Mr Scales, Constance's heart had been put aside as a thing that could wait; so one puts aside the mending of linen when earthquake shocks are about. Mrs Baines was sure that Constance had not chattered to Sophia concerning Mr Povey. Constance, who understood her mother, had too much commonsense and too nice a sense of propriety to do that—and yet here was Sophia exclaiming, "But you let Constance do just as she likes." Were the relations between Constance and Mr Povey, then, common property? Did the young lady assistants discuss them?

As a fact, the young lady assistants did discuss them; not in the shop—for either one of the principal parties, or Mrs Baines herself, was always in the shop, but elsewhere. They discussed little else, when they were free; how she had looked at him today, and how he had blushed, and so forth interminably. Yet Mrs Baines really thought that she alone knew. Such is the power of the ineradicable delusion that one's own affairs, and especially one's own children, are mysteriously different from those of others.

After Sophia's departure Mrs Baines surveyed her daughter and her manager at supper-time with a curious and a diffident eye. They worked, talked, and ate just as though Mrs Baines had never caught them weeping together in the cutting-out room. They had the most matter-of-fact air. They might never have heard whispered the name of love. And there could be no deceit beneath that decorum; for Constance would not deceive. Still, Mrs Baines's conscience was unruly. Order reigned, but nevertheless she knew that she ought to do something, find out something, decide something; she ought, if she did her duty, to take Constance aside and say: "Now, Constance, my mind is freer now. Tell me frankly what has been going on between you and Mr Povey. I have never understood the meaning of that scene in the cutting-out room. Tell me." She ought to have talked in this strain. But she could not. That energetic woman had not sufficient energy left. She wanted rest, rest—even though it were a coward's rest, an ostrich's tranquillity—after the turmoil of apprehensions caused by Sophia. Her soul cried out for peace. She was not, however, to have peace.

On the very first Sunday after Sophia's departure, Mr Povey did not go to chapel in the morning, and he offered no reason for his unusual conduct. He ate his breakfast with appetite, but there was something peculiar in his glance that made Mrs Baines a little uneasy; this something she could not seize upon and define. When she and Constance returned from chapel Mr Povey was playing "Rock of Ages" on the harmonium—again unusual! The serious part of the dinner comprised roast beef and Yorkshire pudding—the pudding being served as a sweet course before the meat. Mrs Baines ate freely of these things, for she loved them, and she was always hungry after a sermon. She also did well with the Cheshire cheese. Her intention was to sleep in the drawing-room after the repast. On Sunday afternoons she invariably tried to sleep in the drawing-room, and she did not often fail. As a rule the girls accompanied her thither from the table, and either "settled down" likewise or crept out of the room when they perceived the gradual sinking of the majestic form into the deep hollows of the easy-chair. Mrs Baines was anticipating with pleasure her somnolent Sunday afternoon.

Constance said grace after meat, and the formula on this particular occasion ran thus—

"Thank God for our good dinner, Amen.—Mother, I must just run upstairs to my room." ("*My* room"—Sophia being far away.)

And off she ran, strangely girlish.

"Well, child, you needn't be in such a hurry," said Mrs Baines, ringing the bell and rising.

She hoped that Constance would remember the conditions precedent to sleep.

"I should like to have a word with you, if it's all the same to you, Mrs Baines," said Mr Povey suddenly, with obvious nervousness. And his tone struck a rude unexpected blow at Mrs Baines's peace of mind. It was a portentous tone.

"What about?" asked she, with an inflection subtly to remind Mr Povey what day it was.

"About Constance," said the astonishing man.

"Constance!" exclaimed Mrs Baines with a histrionic air of bewilderment.

Maggie entered the room, solely in response to the bell, yet a thought jumped up in Mrs Baines's brain, "How prying servants are, to be sure!" For quite five seconds she had a grievance against Maggie. She was compelled to sit down again and wait while Maggie cleared the table. Mr Povey put both his hands in his pockets, got up, went to the window, whistled, and generally behaved in a manner which foretold the worst.

At last Maggie vanished, shutting the door.

"What is it, Mr Povey?"

"Oh!" said Mr Povey, facing her with absurd nervous brusqueness, as though pretending: "Ah, yes! We have something to say—I was forgetting!" Then he began: "It's about Constance and me."

Yes, they had evidently plotted this interview. Constance had evidently taken herself off on purpose to leave Mr Povey unhampered. They were in league. The inevitable had come. No sleep! No repose! Nothing but

worry once more!

"I'm not at all satisfied with the present situation," said Mr Povey, in a tone that corresponded to his words.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr Povey," said Mrs Baines stiffly. This was a simple lie.

"Well, really, Mrs Baines!" Mr Povey protested, "I suppose you won't deny that you know there is something between me and Constance? I suppose you won't deny that?"

"What is there between you and Constance? I can assure you I—"

"That depends on you," Mr Povey interrupted her. When he was nervous his manners deteriorated into a behaviour that resembled rudeness. "That depends on you!" he repeated grimly.

"But—"

"Are we to be engaged or are we not?" pursued Mr Povey, as though Mrs Baines had been guilty of some grave lapse and he was determined not to spare her. "That's what I think ought to be settled, one way or the other. I wish to be perfectly open and above board—in the future, as I have been in the past."

"But you have said nothing to me at all!" Mrs Baines remonstrated, lifting her eyebrows. The way in which the man had sprung this matter upon her was truly too audacious.

Mr Povey approached her as she sat at the table, shaking her ringlets and looking at her hands.

"You know there's something between us!" he insisted.

"How should I know there is something between you? Constance has never said a word to me. And have you?"

"Well," said he. "We've hidden nothing."

"What is there between you and Constance? If I may ask!"

"That depends on you," said he again.

"Have you asked her to be your wife?"

"No. I haven't exactly asked her to be my wife." He hesitated. "You see—"

Mrs Baines collected her forces. "Have you kissed her?" This in a cold voice.

Mr Povey now blushed. "I haven't exactly kissed her," he stammered, apparently shocked by the inquisition. "No, I should not say that I had kissed her."

It might have been that before committing himself he felt a desire for Mrs Baines's definition of a kiss.

"You are very extraordinary," she said loftily. It was no less than the truth.

"All I want to know is—have you got anything against me?" he demanded roughly. "Because if so—"

"Anything against you, Mr Povey? Why should I have anything against you?"

"Then why can't we be engaged?"

She considered that he was bullying her. "That's another question," said she.

"Why can't we be engaged? Ain't I good enough?"

The fact was that he was not regarded as good enough. Mrs Maddack had certainly deemed that he was not good enough. He was a solid mass of excellent qualities; but he lacked brilliance, importance, dignity. He could not impose himself. Such had been the verdict.

And now, while Mrs Baines was secretly reproaching Mr Povey for his inability to impose himself, he was most patently imposing himself on her—and the phenomenon escaped her! She felt that he was bullying her, but somehow she could not perceive his power. Yet the man who could bully Mrs Baines was surely no common soul!

"You know my very high opinion of you," she said.

Mr Povey pursued in a mollified tone. "Assuming that Constance is willing to be engaged, do I understand you consent?"

"But Constance is too young."

"Constance is twenty. She is more than twenty."

"In any case you won't expect me to give you an answer now."

"Why not? You know my position."

She did. From a practical point of view the match would be ideal: no fault could be found with it on that side. But Mrs Baines could not extinguish the idea that it would be a "comedown" for her daughter. Who, after all, was Mr Povey? Mr Povey was nobody.

"I must think things over," she said firmly, putting her lips together.
"I can't reply like this. It is a serious matter."

"When can I have your answer? Tomorrow?"

"No—really—"

"In a week, then?"

"I cannot bind myself to a date," said Mrs Baines, haughtily. She felt that she was gaining ground.

"Because I can't stay on here indefinitely as things are," Mr Povey burst out, and there was a touch of hysteria in his tone.

"Now, Mr Povey, please do be reasonable."

"That's all very well," he went on. "That's all very well. But what I say is that employers have no right to have male assistants in their houses unless they are prepared to let their daughters marry! That's what I say! No *right*!"

Mrs Baines did not know what to answer.

The aspirant wound up: “I must leave if that’s the case.”

“If what’s the case?” she asked herself. “What has come over him?” And aloud: “You know you would place me in a very awkward position by leaving, and I hope you don’t want to mix up two quite different things. I hope you aren’t trying to threaten me.”

“Threaten you!” he cried. “Do you suppose I should leave here for fun? If I leave it will be because I can’t *stand* it That’s all. I can’t stand it. I want Constance, and if I can’t have her, then I can’t *stand* it. What do you think I’m made of?”

“I’m sure—” she began.

“That’s all very well!” he almost shouted.

“But please let me speak,” she said quietly.

“All I say is I can’t *stand* it. That’s all . . . Employers have no *right* . . . We have our feelings like other men.”

He was deeply moved. He might have appeared somewhat grotesque to the strictly impartial observer of human nature. Nevertheless he was deeply and genuinely moved, and possibly human nature could have shown nothing more human than Mr Povey at the moment when, unable any longer to restrain the paroxysm which had so surprisingly overtaken him, he fled from the parlour, passionately, to the retreat of his bedroom.

“That’s the worst of those quiet calm ones,” said Mrs Baines to herself. “You never know if they won’t give way. And when they do, it’s awful—awful . . . What did I do, what did I say, to bring it on? Nothing! Nothing!”

And where was her afternoon sleep? What was going to happen to her daughter? What could she say to Constance? How next could she meet Mr Povey? Ah! It needed a brave, indomitable woman not to cry out brokenly: “I’ve suffered too much. Do anything you like; only let me die in peace!” And so saying, to let everything indifferently slide!

III

Neither Mr Povey nor Constance introduced the delicate subject to her again, and she was determined not to be the first to speak of it. She considered that Mr Povey had taken advantage of his position, and that he had also been infantile and impolite. And somehow she privately blamed Constance for his behaviour. So the matter hung, as it were, suspended in the ether between the opposing forces of pride and passion.

Shortly afterwards events occurred compared to which the vicissitudes of Mr Povey’s heart were of no more account than a shower of rain in April. And fate gave no warning of them; it rather indicated a complete absence of events. When the customary advice circular arrived from Birkinshaws, the name of “our Mr Gerald Scales” was replaced on it by another and an unfamiliar name. Mrs Baines, seeing the circular by accident, experienced a sense of relief, mingled with the professional disappointment of a diplomatist who has elaborately provided for contingencies which have failed to happen. She had sent Sophia away for nothing; and no doubt her maternal affection had exaggerated a mole-hill into a mountain. Really, when she reflected on the past, she could not recall a single fact that would justify her theory of an attachment secretly budding between Sophia and the young man Scales! Not a single little fact! All she could bring forward was that Sophia had twice encountered Scales in the street.

She felt a curious interest in the fate of Scales, for whom in her own mind she had long prophesied evil, and when Birkinshaws’ representative came she took care to be in the shop; her intention was to converse with him, and ascertain as much as was ascertainable, after Mr Povey had transacted business. For this purpose, at a suitable moment, she traversed the shop to Mr Povey’s side, and in so doing she had a fleeting view of King Street, and in King Street of a familiar vehicle. She stopped, and seemed to catch the distant sound of knocking. Abandoning the traveller, she hurried towards the parlour, in the passage she assuredly did hear knocking, angry and impatient knocking, the knocking of someone who thinks he has knocked too long.

“Of course Maggie is at the top of the house!” she muttered sarcastically.

She unchained, unbolted, and unlocked the side-door.

“At last!” It was Aunt Harriet’s voice, exacerbated. “What! You, sister? You’re soon up. What a blessing!”

The two majestic and imposing creatures met on the mat, craning forward so that their lips might meet above their terrific bosoms.

“What’s the matter?” Mrs Baines asked, fearfully.

“Well, I do declare!” said Mrs Maddack. “And I’ve driven specially over to ask *you*!”

“Where’s Sophia?” demanded Mrs Baines.

“You don’t mean to say she’s not come, sister?” Mrs Maddack sank down on to the sofa.

“Come?” Mrs Baines repeated. “Of course she’s not come! What do you mean, sister?”

“The very moment she got Constance’s letter yesterday, saying you were ill in bed and she’d better come over to help in the shop, she started. I got Bratt’s dog-cart for her.”

Mrs Baines in her turn also sank down on to the sofa.

“I’ve not been ill,” she said. “And Constance hasn’t written for a week! Only yesterday I was telling her—”

“Sister—it can’t be! Sophia had letters from Constance every morning. At least she said they were from

Constance. I told her to be sure and write me how you were last night, and she promised faithfully she would. And it was because I got nothing by this morning's post that I decided to come over myself, to see if it was anything serious."

"Serious it is!" murmured Mrs Baines.

"What—"

"Sophia's run off. That's the plain English of it!" said Mrs Baines with frigid calm.

"Nay! That I'll never believe. I've looked after Sophia night and day as if she was my own, and—"

"If she hasn't run off, where is she?"

Mrs Maddack opened the door with a tragic gesture.

"Bladen," she called in a loud voice to the driver of the waggonette, who was standing on the pavement.

"Yes'm."

"It was Pember drove Miss Sophia yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Yes'm.'

She hesitated. A clumsy question might enlighten a member of the class which ought never to be enlightened about one's private affairs.

"He didn't come all the way here?"

"No'm. He happened to say last night when he got back as Miss Sophia had told him to set her down at Knype Station."

"I thought so!" said Mrs Maddack, courageously.

"Yes'm."

"Sister!" she moaned, after carefully shutting the door. They clung to each other.

The horror of what had occurred did not instantly take full possession of them, because the power of credence, of imaginatively realizing a supreme event, whether of great grief or of great happiness, is ridiculously finite. But every minute the horror grew more clear, more intense, more tragically dominant over them. There were many things that they could not say to each other—from pride, from shame, from the inadequacy of words. Neither could utter the name of Gerald Scales. And Aunt Harriet could not stoop to defend herself from a possible charge of neglect; nor could Mrs Baines stoop to assure her sister that she was incapable of preferring such a charge. And the sheer, immense criminal folly of Sophia could not even be referred to: it was unspeakable. So the interview proceeded, lamely, clumsily, inconsequently, leading to naught.

Sophia was gone. She was gone with Gerald Scales. That beautiful child, that incalculable, untamable, impossible creature, had committed the final folly; without pretext or excuse, and with what elaborate deceit! Yes, without excuse! She had not been treated harshly; she had had a degree of liberty which would have astounded and shocked her grandmothers; she had been petted, humoured, spoilt. And her answer was to disgrace the family by an act as irrevocable as it was utterly vicious. If among her desires was the desire to humiliate those majesties, her mother and Aunt Harriet, she would have been content could she have seen them on the sofa there, humbled, shamed, mortally wounded! Ah, the monstrous Chinese cruelty of youth!

What was to be done? Tell dear Constance? No, this was not, at the moment, an affair for the younger generation. It was too new and raw for the younger generation. Moreover, capable, proud, and experienced as they were, they felt the need of a man's voice, and a man's hard, callous ideas. It was a case for Mr Critchlow. Maggie was sent to fetch him, with a particular request that he should come to the side-door. He came expectant, with the pleasurable anticipation of disaster, and he was not disappointed. He passed with the sisters the happiest hour that had fallen to him for years. Quickly he arranged the alternatives for them. Would they tell the police, or would they take the risks of waiting? They shied away, but with fierce brutality he brought them again and again to the immediate point of decision . . . Well, they could not tell the police! They simply could not . . . Then they must face another danger . . . He had no mercy for them. And while he was torturing them there arrived a telegram, despatched from Charing Cross, "I am all right, Sophia." That proved, at any rate, that the child was not heartless, not merely careless.

Only yesterday, it seemed to Mrs Baines, she had borne Sophia; only yesterday she was a baby, a schoolgirl to be smacked. The years rolled up in a few hours. And now she was sending telegrams from a place called Charing Cross! How unlike was the hand of the telegram to Sophia's hand! How mysteriously curt and inhuman was that official hand, as Mrs Baines stared at it through red, wet eyes!

Mr Critchlow said someone should go to Manchester, to ascertain about Scales. He went himself, that afternoon, and returned with the news that an aunt of Scales had recently died, leaving him twelve thousand pounds, and that he had, after quarrelling with his uncle Boldero, abandoned Birkinshaws at an hour's notice and vanished with his inheritance.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff," said Mr Critchlow. "I could ha' warned ye o' all this years ago, ever since she killed her father!"

Mr Critchlow left nothing unsaid.

During the night Mrs Baines lived through all Sophia's life, lived through it more intensely than ever Sophia had done.

The next day people began to know. A whisper almost inaudible went across the Square, and into the town:

and in the stillness everyone heard it. “Sophia Baines run off with a commercial!”

In another fortnight a note came, also dated from London.

“Dear Mother, I am married to Gerald Scales. Please don’t worry about me. We are going abroad. Your affectionate Sophia. Love to Constance.” No tear-stains on that pale blue sheet! No sign of agitation!

And Mrs Baines said: “My life is over.” It was, though she was scarcely fifty. She felt old, old and beaten. She had fought and been vanquished. The everlasting purpose had been too much for her. Virtue had gone out of her—the virtue to hold up her head and look the Square in the face. She, the wife of John Baines! She, a Syme of Axe!

Old houses, in the course of their history, see sad sights, and never forget them! And ever since, in the solemn physiognomy of the triple house of John Baines at the corner of St Luke’s Square and King Street, have remained the traces of the sight it saw on the morning of the afternoon when Mr and Mrs Povey returned from their honeymoon—the sight of Mrs Baines getting into the waggonette for Axe; Mrs Baines, encumbered with trunks and parcels, leaving the scene of her struggles and her defeat, whither she had once come as slim as a wand, to return stout and heavy, and heavy-hearted, to her childhood; content to live with her grandiose sister until such time as she should be ready for burial! The grimy and impassive old house perhaps heard her heart saying: “Only yesterday they were little girls, ever so tiny, and now—” The driving-off of a waggonette can be a dreadful thing.

BOOK TWO

CONSTANCE

CHAPTER I

REVOLUTION

I

"Well," said Mr Povey, rising from the rocking-chair that in a previous age had been John Baines's, "I've got to make a start some time, so I may as well begin now!"

And he went from the parlour into the shop. Constance's eye followed him as far as the door, where their glances met for an instant in the transient gaze which expresses the tenderness of people who feel more than they kiss.

It was on the morning of this day that Mrs Baines, relinquishing the sovereignty of St Luke's Square, had gone to live as a younger sister in the house of Harriet Maddack at Axe. Constance guessed little of the secret anguish of that departure. She only knew that it was just like her mother, having perfectly arranged the entire house for the arrival of the honeymoon couple from Buxton, to flit early away so as to spare the natural blushing diffidence of the said couple. It was like her mother's common sense and her mother's sympathetic comprehension. Further, Constance did not pursue her mother's feelings, being far too busy with her own. She sat there full of new knowledge and new importance, brimming with experience and strange, unexpected aspirations, purposes, yes—and cunnings! And yet, though the very curves of her cheeks seemed to be mysteriously altering, the old Constance still lingered in that frame, an innocent soul hesitating to spread its wings and quit for ever the body which had been its home; you could see the timid thing peeping wistfully out of the eyes of the married woman.

Constance rang the bell for Maggie to clear the table; and as she did so she had the illusion that she was not really a married woman and a house mistress, but only a kind of counterfeit. She did most fervently hope that all would go right in the house—at any rate until she had grown more accustomed to her situation.

The hope was to be disappointed. Maggie's rather silly, obsequious smile concealed but for a moment the ineffable tragedy that had lain in wait for unarmed Constance.

"If you please, Mrs Povey," said Maggie, as she crushed cups together on the tin tray with her great, red hands, which always looked like something out of a butcher's shop; then a pause, "Will you please accept of this?"

Now, before the wedding Maggie had already, with tears of affection, given Constance a pair of blue glass vases (in order to purchase which she had been obliged to ask for special permission to go out), and Constance wondered what was coming now from Maggie's pocket. A small piece of folded paper came from Maggie's pocket. Constance accepted of it, and read: "I begs to give one month's notice to leave. Signed Maggie. June 10, 1867."

"Maggie!" exclaimed the old Constance, terrified by this incredible occurrence, ere the married woman could strangle her.

"I never give notice before, Mrs Povey," said Maggie, "so I don't know as I know how it ought for be done—not rightly. But I hope as you'll accept of it, Mrs Povey."

"Oh! of course," said Mrs Povey, primly, just as if Maggie was not the central supporting pillar of the house, just as if Maggie had not assisted at her birth, just as if the end of the world had not abruptly been announced, just as if St Luke's Square were not inconceivable without Maggie. "But why—"

"Well, Mrs Povey, I've been a-thinking it over in my kitchen, and I said to myself: 'If there's going to be one change there'd better be two,' I says. Not but what I wouldn't work my fingers to the bone for ye, Miss Constance."

Here Maggie began to cry into the tray.

Constance looked at her. Despite the special muslin of that day she had traces of the slatternliness of which Mrs Baines had never been able to cure her. She was over forty, big, gawky. She had no figure, no charms of any kind. She was what was left of a woman after twenty-two years in the cave of a philanthropic family. And in her cave she had actually been thinking things over! Constance detected for the first time, beneath the dehumanized drudge, the stirrings of a separate and perhaps capricious individuality. Maggie's engagements had never been real to her employers. Within the house she had never been, in practice, anything but "Maggie"—an organism. And now she was permitting herself ideas about changes!

"You'll soon be suited with another, Mrs Povey," said Maggie. "There's many a—many a—" She burst into sobs.

"But if you really want to leave, what are you crying for, Maggie?" asked Mrs Povey, at her wisest. "Have you told mother?"

"No, miss," Maggie whimpered, absently wiping her wrinkled cheeks with ineffectual muslin. "I couldn't seem to fancy telling your mother. And as you're the mistress now, I thought as I'd save if for you when you come home. I hope you'll excuse me, Mrs Povey."

"Of course I'm very sorry. You've been a very good servant. And in these days—"

The child had acquired this turn of speech from her mother. It did not appear to occur to either of them that they were living in the sixties.

"Thank ye, miss."

"And what are you thinking of doing, Maggie? You know you won't get many places like this."

"To tell ye the truth, Mrs Povey, I'm going to get married mysen."

"Indeed!" murmured Constance, with the perfunctoriness of habit in replying to these tidings.

"Oh! but I am, mum," Maggie insisted. "It's all settled. Mr Hollins, mum."

"Not Hollins, the fish-hawker!"

"Yes, mum. I seem to fancy him. You don't remember as him and me was engaged in '48. He was my first, like. I broke it off because he was in that Chartist lot, and I knew as Mr Baines would never stand that. Now he's asked me again. He's been a widower this long time."

"I'm sure I hope you'll be happy, Maggie. But what about his habits?"

"He won't have no habits with me, Mrs Povey."

A woman was definitely emerging from the drudge.

When Maggie, having entirely ceased sobbing, had put the folded cloth in the table-drawer and departed with the tray, her mistress became frankly the girl again. No primness about her as she stood alone there in the parlour; no pretence that Maggie's notice to leave was an everyday document, to be casually glanced at as one glances at an unpaid bill! She would be compelled to find a new servant, making solemn inquiries into character, and to train the new servant, and to talk to her from heights from which she had never addressed Maggie. At that moment she had an illusion that there were no other available, suitable servants in the whole world. And the arranged marriage? She felt that this time—the thirteenth or fourteenth time—the engagement was serious and would only end at the altar. The vision of Maggie and Hollins at the altar shocked her. Marriage was a series of phenomena, and a general state, very holy and wonderful—too sacred, somehow, for such creatures as Maggie and Hollins. Her vague, instinctive revolt against such a usage of matrimony centred round the idea of a strong, eternal smell of fish. However, the projected outrage on a hallowed institution troubled her much less than the imminent problem of domestic service.

She ran into the shop—or she would have run if she had not checked her girlishness betimes—and on her lips, ready to be whispered importantly into a husband's astounded ear, were the words, "Maggie has given notice! Yes! Truly!" But Samuel Povey was engaged. He was leaning over the counter and staring at an outspread paper upon which a certain Mr Yardley was making strokes with a thick pencil. Mr Yardley, who had a long red beard, painted houses and rooms. She knew him only by sight. In her mind she always associated him with the sign over his premises in Trafalgar Road, "Yardley Bros, Authorized plumbers. Painters. Decorators. Paper-hangers. Facia writers." For years, in childhood, she had passed that sign without knowing what sort of thing "Bros" and "Facia" were, and what was the mysterious similarity between a plumber and a version of the Bible. She could not interrupt her husband, he was wholly absorbed; nor could she stay in the shop (which appeared just a little smaller than usual), for that would have meant an unsuccessful endeavour to front the young lady-assistants as though nothing in particular had happened to her. So she went sedately up the showroom stairs and thus to the bedroom floors of the house—her house! Mrs Povey's house! She even climbed to Constance's old bedroom; her mother had stripped the bed—that was all, except a slight diminution of this room, corresponding to that of the shop! Then to the drawing-room. In the recess outside the drawing-room door the black box of silver plate still lay. She had expected her mother to take it; but no! Assuredly her mother was one to do things handsomely—when she did them. In the drawing-room, not a tassel of an antimacassar touched! Yes, the fire-screen, the luscious bunch of roses on an expanse of mustard, which Constance had worked for her mother years ago, was gone! That her mother should have clung to just that one souvenir, out of all the heavy opulence of the drawing-room, touched Constance intimately. She perceived that if she could not talk to her husband she must write to her mother.

And she sat down at the oval table and wrote, “Darling mother, I am sure you will be very surprised to hear . . . She means it . . . I think she is making a serious mistake. Ought I to put an advertisement in the *Signal*, or will it do if . . . Please write by return. We are back, and have enjoyed ourselves very much. Sam says he enjoys getting up late . . .” And so On to the last inch of the fourth scolloped page.

She was obliged to revisit the shop for a stamp, stamps being kept in Mr Povey’s desk in the corner—a high desk, at which you stood. Mr Povey was now in earnest converse with Mr Yardley at the door, and twilight, which began a full hour earlier in the shop than in the Square, had cast faint shadows in corners behind counters.

“Will you just run out with this to the pillar, Miss Dadd?”

“With pleasure, Mrs Povey.”

“Where are you going to?” Mr Povey interrupted his conversation to stop the flying girl.

“She’s just going to the post for me,” Constance called out from the region of the till.

“Oh! All right!”

A trifle! A nothing! Yet somehow, in the quiet customerless shop, the episode, with the scarce perceptible difference in Samuel’s tone at his second remark, was delicious to Constance. Somehow it was the *real* beginning of her wifehood. (There had been about nine other real beginnings in the past fortnight.)

Mr Povey came in to supper, laden with ledgers and similar works which Constance had never even pretended to understand. It was a sign from him that the honeymoon was over. He was proprietor now, and his ardour for ledgers most justifiable, Still, there was the question of her servant.

“Never!” he exclaimed, when she told him all about the end of the world. A “never” which expressed extreme astonishment and the liveliest concern!

But Constance had anticipated that he would have been just a little more knocked down, bowled over, staggered, stunned, flabbergasted. In a swift gleam of insight she saw that she had been in danger of forgetting her *rôle* of experienced, capable married woman.

“I shall have to set about getting a fresh one,” she said hastily, with an admirable assumption of light and easy casualness.

Mr Povey seemed to think that Hollins would suit Maggie pretty well. He made no remark to the betrothed when she answered the final bell of the night.

He opened his ledgers, whistling.

“I think I shall go up, dear,” said Constance. “I’ve a lot of things to put away.”

“Do,” said he. “Call out when you’ve done.”

II

“Sam!” she cried from the top of the crooked stairs.

No answer. The door at the foot was closed.

“Sam!”

“Hello?” Distantly, faintly.

“I’ve done all I’m going to do tonight.”

And she ran back along the corridor, a white figure in the deep gloom, and hurried into bed, and drew the clothes up to her chin.

In the life of a bride there are some dramatic moments. If she has married the industrious apprentice, one of those moments occurs when she first occupies the sacred bedchamber of her ancestors, and the bed on which she was born. Her parents’ room had always been to Constance, if not sacred, at least invested with a certain moral solemnity. She could not enter it as she would enter another room. The course of nature, with its succession of deaths, conceptions, and births, slowly makes such a room august with a mysterious quality which interprets the grandeur of mere existence and imposes itself on all. Constance had the strangest sensations in that bed, whose heavy dignity of ornament symbolized a past age; sensations of sacrilege and trespass, of being a naughty girl to whom punishment would accrue for this shocking freak. Not since she was quite tiny had she slept in that bed—one night with her mother, before her father’s seizure, when he had been away. What a limitless, unfathomable bed it was then! Now it was just a bed—so she had to tell herself—like any other bed. The tiny child that, safely touching its mother, had slept in the vast expanse, seemed to her now a pathetic little thing; its image made her feel melancholy. And her mind dwelt on sad events: the death of her father, the flight of darling Sophia; the immense grief, and the exile, of her mother. She esteemed that she knew what life was, and that it was grim. And she sighed. But the sigh was an affectation, meant partly to convince herself that she was grown-up, and partly to keep her in countenance in the intimidating bed. This melancholy was factitious, was less than transient foam on the deep sea of her joy. Death and sorrow and sin were dim shapes to her; the ruthless egoism of happiness blew them away with a puff, and their wistful faces vanished. To see her there in the bed, framed in mahogany and tassels, lying on her side, with her young glowing cheeks, and honest but not artless gaze, and the rich curve of her hip lifting the counterpane, one would have said that she had never heard of aught but love.

Mr Povey entered, the bridegroom, quickly, firmly, carrying it off rather well, but still self-conscious. “After

all," his shoulders were trying to say, "what's the difference between this bedroom and the bed-room of a boarding-house? Indeed, ought we not to feel more at home here? Besides, confound it, we've been married a fortnight!"

"Doesn't it give you a funny feeling, sleeping in this room? It does me," said Constance. Women, even experienced women, are so foolishly frank. They have no decency, no self-respect.

"Really?" replied Mr Povey, with loftiness, as who should say: "What an extraordinary thing that a reasonable creature can have such fancies! Now to me this room is exactly like any other room." And he added aloud, glancing away from the glass, where he was unfastening his necktie: "It's not a bad room at all." This, with the judicial air of an auctioneer.

Not for an instant did he deceive Constance, who read his real sensations with accuracy. But his futile poses did not in the slightest degree lessen her respect for him. On the contrary, she admired him the more for them; they were a sort of embroidery on the solid stuff of his character. At that period he could not do wrong for her. The basis of her regard for him was, she often thought, his honesty, his industry, his genuine kindliness of act, his grasp of the business, his perseverance, his passion for doing at once that which had to be done. She had the greatest admiration for his qualities, and he was in her eyes an indivisible whole; she could not admire one part of him and frown upon another. Whatever he did was good because he did it. She knew that some people were apt to smile at certain phases of his individuality; she knew that far down in her mother's heart was a suspicion that she had married ever so little beneath her. But this knowledge did not disturb her. She had no doubt as to the correctness of her own estimate.

Mr Povey was an exceedingly methodical person, and he was also one of those persons who must always be "before-hand" with time. Thus at night he would arrange his raiment so that in the morning it might be reassumed in the minimum of minutes. He was not a man, for example, to leave the changing of studs from one shirt to another till the morrow. Had it been practicable, he would have brushed his hair the night before. Constance already loved to watch his meticulous preparations. She saw him now go into his old bedroom and return with a paper collar, which he put on the dressing-table next to a black necktie. His shop-suit was laid out on a chair.

"Oh, Sam!" she exclaimed impulsively, "you surely aren't going to begin wearing those horrid paper collars again!" During the honeymoon he had worn linen collars.

Her tone was perfectly gentle, but the remark, nevertheless, showed a lack of tact. It implied that all his life Mr Povey had been enveloping his neck in something which was horrid. Like all persons with a tendency to fall into the ridiculous, Mr Povey was exceedingly sensitive to personal criticisms. He flushed darkly.

"I didn't know they were 'horrid,'" he snapped. He was hurt and angry. Anger surprised him unawares.

Both of them suddenly saw that they were standing on the edge of a chasm, and drew back. They had imagined themselves to be wandering safely in a flowered meadow, and here was this bottomless chasm! It was most disconcerting.

Mr Povey's hand hovered undecided over the collar. "However—" he muttered.

She could feel that he was trying with all his might to be gentle and pacific. And she was aghast at her own stupid clumsiness, she so experienced!

"Just as you like, dear," she said quickly. "Please!"

"Oh no!" And he did his best to smile, and went off gawkily with the collar and came back with a linen one.

Her passion for him burned stronger than ever. She knew then that she did not love him for his good qualities, but for something boyish and naïve that there was about him, an indescribable something that occasionally, when his face was close to hers, made her dizzy.

The chasm had disappeared. In such moments, when each must pretend not to have seen or even suspected the chasm, small-talk is essential.

"Wasn't that Mr Yardley in the shop tonight?" began Constance.

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

"I'd sent for him. He's going to paint us a signboard."

Useless for Samuel to make-believe that nothing in this world is more ordinary than a signboard.

"Oh!" murmured Constance. She said no more, the episode of the paper collar having weakened her self-confidence.

But a signboard!

What with servants, chasms, and signboards, Constance considered that her life as a married woman would not be deficient in excitement. Long afterwards she fell asleep, thinking of Sophia.

III

A few days later Constance was arranging the more precious of her wedding presents in the parlour; some had to be wrapped in tissue and in brown paper and then tied with string and labelled; others had special cases of their own, leather without and velvet within. Among the latter was the resplendent egg-stand holding twelve silver-gilt egg-cups and twelve chased spoons to match, presented by Aunt Harriet. In the Five Towns'

phrase, “it must have cost money.” Even if Mr and Mrs Povey had ten guests or ten children, and all the twelve of them were simultaneously gripped by a desire to eat eggs at breakfast or tea—even in this remote contingency Aunt Harriet would have been pained to see the egg-stand in use; such treasures are not designed for use. The presents, few in number, were mainly of this character, because, owing to her mother’s heroic cession of the entire interior, Constance already possessed every necessary. The fewness of the presents was accounted for by the fact that the wedding had been strictly private and had taken place at Axe. There is nothing like secrecy in marriage for discouraging the generous impulses of one’s friends. It was Mrs Baines, abetted by both the chief parties, who had decided that the wedding should be private and secluded. Sophia’s wedding had been altogether too private and secluded; but the casting of a veil over Constance’s (whose union was irreproachable) somehow justified, after the event, the circumstances of Sophia’s, indicating as it did that Mrs Baines believed in secret weddings on principle. In such matters Mrs Baines was capable of extraordinary subtlety.

And while Constance was thus taking her wedding presents with due seriousness, Maggie was cleaning the steps that led from the pavement of King Street to the side-door, and the door was ajar. It was a fine June morning.

Suddenly, over the sound of scouring, Constance heard a dog’s low growl and then the hoarse voice of a man:

“Mester in, wench?”

“Happen he is, happen he isn’t,” came Maggie’s answer. She had no fancy for being called wench.

Constance went to the door, not merely from curiosity, but from a feeling that her authority and her responsibilities as housemistress extended to the pavement surrounding the house.

The famous James Boon, of Buck Row, the greatest dog-fancier in the Five Towns, stood at the bottom of the steps: a tall, fat man, clad in stiff, stained brown and smoking a black clay pipe less than three inches long. Behind him attended two bulldogs.

“Morning, missis!” cried Boon, cheerfully. “I’ve heerd tell as th’ mister is looking out for a dog, as you might say.”

“I don’t stay here with them animals a-sniffing at me—no, that I don’t!” observed Maggie, picking herself up.

“Is he?” Constance hesitated. She knew that Samuel had vaguely referred to dogs; she had not, however, imagined that he regarded a dog as aught but a beautiful dream. No dog had ever put paw into that house, and it seemed impossible that one should ever do so. As for those beasts of prey on the pavement . . . !

“Ay!” said James Boon, calmly.

“I’ll tell him you’re here,” said Constance. “But I don’t know if he’s at liberty. He seldom is at this time of day. Maggie, you’d better come in.”

She went slowly to the shop, full of fear for the future.

“Sam,” she whispered to her husband, who was writing at his desk, “here’s a man come to see you about a dog.”

Assuredly he was taken aback. Still, he behaved with much presence of mind.

“Oh, about a dog! Who is it?”

“It’s that Jim Boon. He says he’s heard you want one.”

The renowned name of Jim Boon gave him pause; but he had to go through with the affair, and he went through with it, though nervously. Constance followed his agitated footsteps to the side-door.

“Morning, Boon.”

“Morning, mester.”

They began to talk dogs, Mr Povey, for his part, with due caution.

“Now, there’s a dog!” said Boon, pointing to one of the bull-dogs, a miracle of splendid ugliness.

“Yes,” responded Mr Povey, insincerely. “He is a beauty. What’s it worth now, at a venture?”

“I’ll tak’ a hundred and twenty sovereigns for her,” said Boon. “Th’ other’s a bit cheaper—a hundred.”

“Oh, Sam!” gasped Constance.

And even Mr Povey nearly lost his nerve. “That’s more than I want to give,” said he timidly.

“But look at her!” Boon persisted, roughly snatching up the more expensive animal, and displaying her cannibal teeth.

Mr Povey shook his head. Constance glanced away.

“That’s not quite the sort of dog I want,” said Mr Povey.

“Fox-terrier?”

“Yes, that’s more like,” Mr Povey agreed eagerly.

“What’ll ye run to?”

“Oh,” said Mr Povey, largely, “I don’t know.”

“Will ye run to a tenner?”

“I thought of something cheaper.”

“Well, hoo much? Out wi’ it, mester.”

“Not more than two pounds,” said Mr Povey. He would have said one pound had he dared. The prices of

dogs amazed him.

"I thowt it was a *dog* as ye wanted!" said Boon. "Look 'ere, mester. Come up to my yard and see what I've got."

"I will," said Mr Povey.

"And bring missis along too. Now, what about a cat for th' missis? Or a gold-fish?"

The end of the episode was that a young lady aged some twelve months entered the Povey household on trial. Her exiguous legs twinkled all over the parlour, and she had the oddest appearance in the parlour. But she was so confiding, so affectionate, so timorous, and her black nose was so icy in that hot weather, that Constance loved her violently within an hour. Mr Povey made rules for her. He explained to her that she must never, never go into the shop. But she went, and he whipped her to the squealing point, and Constance cried an instant, while admiring her husband's firmness.

The dog was not all.

On another day Constance, prying into the least details of the parlour, discovered a box of cigars inside the lid of the harmonium, on the keyboard. She was so unaccustomed to cigars that at first she did not realize what the object was. Her father had never smoked, nor drunk intoxicants; nor had Mr Critchlow. Nobody had ever smoked in that house, where tobacco had always been regarded as equally licentious with cards, "the devil's playthings." Certainly Samuel had never smoked in the house, though the sight of the cigar-box reminded Constance of an occasion when her mother had announced an incredulous suspicion that Mr Povey, fresh from an excursion into the world on a Thursday evening, "smelt of smoke."

She closed the harmonium and kept silence.

That very night, coming suddenly into the parlour, she caught Samuel at the harmonium. The lid went down with a resonant bang that awoke sympathetic vibrations in every corner of the room.

"What is it?" Constance inquired, jumping.

"Oh, nothing!" replied Mr Povey, carelessly.

Each was deceiving the other: Mr Povey hid his crime, and Constance hid her knowledge of his crime. False, false! But this is what marriage is.

And the next day Constance had a visit in the shop from a possible new servant, recommended to her by Mr Holl, the grocer.

"Will you please step this way?" said Constance, with affable primness, steeped in the novel sense of what it is to be the sole responsible mistress of a vast household. She preceded the girl to the parlour, and as they passed the open door of Mr Povey's cutting-out room, Constance had the clear vision and titillating odour of her husband smoking a cigar. He was in his shirtsleeves, calmly cutting out, and Fan (the lady companion), at watch on the bench, yapped at the possible new servant.

"I think I shall try that girl," said she to Samuel at tea. She said nothing as to the cigar; nor did he.

On the following evening, after supper, Mr Povey burst out:

"I think I'll have a weed! You didn't know I smoked, did you?"

Thus Mr Povey came out in his true colours as a blood, a blade, and a gay spark.

But dogs and cigars, disconcerting enough in their degree, were to the signboard, when the signboard at last came, as skim milk is to hot brandy. It was the signboard that, more startingly than anything else, marked the dawn of a new era in St Luke's Square. Four men spent a day and a half in fixing it; they had ladders, ropes, and pulleys, and two of them dined on the flat lead roof of the projecting shop-windows. The signboard was thirty-five feet long and two feet in depth; over its centre was a semicircle about three feet in radius; this semicircle bore the legend, judiciously disposed, "S. Povey. Late." All the signboard proper was devoted to the words, "John Baines," in gold letters a foot and a half high, on a green ground.

The Square watched and wondered; and murmured: "Well, bless us! What next?"

It was agreed that in giving paramount importance to the name of his late father-in-law, Mr Povey had displayed a very nice feeling.

Some asked with glee: "What'll the old lady have to say?"

Constance asked herself this, but not with glee. When Constance walked down the Square homewards, she could scarcely bear to look at the sign; the thought of what her mother might say frightened her. Her mother's first visit of state was imminent, and Aunt Harriet was to accompany her. Constance felt almost sick as the day approached. When she faintly hinted her apprehensions to Samuel, he demanded, as if surprised—

"Haven't you mentioned it in one of your letters?"

"Oh *no*!"

"If that's all," said he, with bravado, "I'll write and tell her myself."

IV

So that Mrs Baines was duly apprised of the signboard before her arrival. The letter written by her to Constance after receiving Samuel's letter, which was merely the amiable epistle of a son-in-law anxious to be a little more than correct, contained no reference to the signboard. This silence, however, did not in the least allay Constance's apprehensions as to what might occur when her mother and Samuel met beneath the

signboard itself. It was therefore with a fearful as well as an eager, loving heart that Constance opened her side-door and ran down the steps when the waggonette stopped in King Street on the Thursday morning of the great visit of the sisters. But a surprise awaited her. Aunt Harriet had not come. Mrs Baines explained, as she soundly kissed her daughter, that at the last moment Aunt Harriet had not felt well enough to undertake the journey. She sent her fondest love, and cake. Her pains had recurred. It was these mysterious pains which had prevented the sisters from coming to Bursley earlier. The word "cancer"—the continual terror of stout women—had been on their lips, without having been actually uttered; then there was a surcease, and each was glad that she had refrained from the dread syllables. In view of the recurrence, it was not unnatural that Mrs Baines's vigorous cheerfulness should be somewhat forced.

"What is it, do you think?" Constance inquired.

Mrs Baines pushed her lips out and raised her eyebrows—a gesture which meant that the pains might mean God knew what.

"I hope she'll be all right alone," observed Constance.

"Of course," said Mrs Baines quickly. "But you don't suppose I was going to disappoint you, do you?" she added, looking round as if to defy the fates in general.

This speech, and its tone, gave intense pleasure to Constance; and, laden with parcels, they mounted the stairs together, very content with each other, very happy in the discovery that they were still mother and daughter, very intimate in an inarticulate way.

Constance had imagined long, detailed, absorbing, and highly novel conversations between herself and her mother upon this their first meeting after her marriage. But alone in the bedroom, and with a clear half-hour to dinner, they neither of them seemed to have a great deal to impart.

Mrs Baines slowly removed her light mantle and laid it with precautions on the white damask counterpane. Then, fingering her weeds, she glanced about the chamber. Nothing was changed. Though Constance had, previous to her marriage, envisaged certain alterations, she had determined to postpone them, feeling that one revolutionist in a house was enough.

"Well, my chick, you all right?" said Mrs Baines, with hearty and direct energy, gazing straight into her daughter's eyes.

Constance perceived that the question was universal in its comprehensiveness, the one unique expression that the mother would give to her maternal concern and curiosity, and that condensed into six words as much interest as would have overflowed into a whole day of the chatter of some mothers. She met the candid glance, flushing.

"Oh *yes*!" she answered with ecstatic fervour. "Perfectly!"

And Mrs Baines nodded, as if dismissing *that*. "You're stouter," said she, curtly. "If you aren't careful you'll be as big as any of us."

"Oh, mother."

The interview fell to a lower plane of emotion. It even fell as far as Maggie. What chiefly preoccupied Constance was a subtle change in her mother. She found her mother fussy in trifles. Her manner of laying down her mantle, of smoothing out her gloves, and her anxiety that her bonnet should not come to harm, were rather trying, were perhaps, in the very slightest degree, pitiable. It was nothing; it was barely perceptible, and yet it was enough to alter Constance's mental attitude to her mother. "Poor dear!" thought Constance. "I'm afraid she's not what she was." Incredible that her mother could have aged in less than six weeks! Constance did not allow for the chemistry that had been going on in herself.

The encounter between Mrs Baines and her son-in-law was of the most satisfactory nature. He was waiting in the parlour for her to descend. He made himself exceedingly agreeable, kissing her, and flattering her by his evidently sincere desire to please. He explained that he had kept an eye open for the waggonette, but had been called away. His "Dear me!" on learning about Aunt Harriet lacked nothing in conviction, though both women knew that his affection for Aunt Harriet would never get the better of his reason. To Constance, her husband's behaviour was marvellously perfect. She had not suspected him to be such a man of the world. And her eyes said to her mother, quite unconsciously: "You see, after all, you didn't rate Sam as high as you ought to have done. Now you see your mistake."

As they sat waiting for dinner, Constance and Mrs Baines on the sofa, and Samuel on the edge of the nearest rocking-chair, a small scuffling noise was heard outside the door which gave on the kitchen steps, the door yielded to pressure and Fan rushed importantly in, deranging mats. Fan's nose had been hinting to her that she was behind the times, not up-to-date in the affairs of the household, and she had hurried from the kitchen to make inquiries. It occurred to her *en route* that she had been washed that morning. The spectacle of Mrs Baines stopped her. She stood, with her legs slightly outstretched, her nose lifted, her ears raking forward, her bright eyes blinking, and her tail undecided. "I was sure I'd never smelt anything like that before," she was saying to herself, as she stared at Mrs Baines.

And Mrs Baines, staring at Fan, had a similar though not the same sentiment. The silence was terrible. Constance took on the mien of a culprit, and Sam had obviously lost his easy bearing of a man of the world. Mrs Baines was merely thunderstruck.

A dog!

Suddenly Fan's tail began to wag more quickly; and then, having looked in vain for encouragement to her master and mistress, she gave one mighty spring and alighted in Mrs Baines's lap. It was an aim she could not have missed. Constance emitted an "Oh, *Fan*!" of shocked terror, and Samuel betrayed his nervous tension by an involuntary movement. But Fan had settled down into that titanic lap as into heaven. It was a greater flattery than Mr Povey's.

"So your name's Fan!" murmured Mrs Baines, stroking the animal. "You are a dear!"

"Yes, isn't she?" said Constance, with inconceivable rapidity.

The danger was past. Thus, without any explanation, Fan became an accepted fact.

The next moment Maggie served the Yorkshire pudding.

"Well, Maggie," said Mrs Baines. "So you are going to get married this time? When is it?"

"Sunday, ma'am."

"And you leave here on Saturday?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I must have a talk with you before I go."

During the dinner, not a word as to the signboard! Several times the conversation curved towards that signboard in the most alarming fashion, but invariably it curved away again, like a train from another train when two trains are simultaneously leaving a station. Constance had frights, so serious as to destroy her anxiety about the cookery. In the end she comprehended that her mother had adopted a silently disapproving attitude. Fan was socially very useful throughout the repast.

After dinner Constance was on pins lest Samuel should light a cigar. She had not requested him not to do so, for though she was entirely sure of his affection, she had already learned that a husband is possessed by a demon of contrariety which often forces him to violate his higher feelings. However, Samuel did not light a cigar. He went off to superintend the shutting-up of the shop, while Mrs Baines chatted with Maggie and gave her £5 for a wedding present. Then Mr Critchlow called to offer his salutations.

A little before tea Mrs Baines announced that she would go out for a short walk by herself.

"Where has she gone to?" smiled Samuel, superiorly, as with Constance at the window he watched her turn down King Street towards the church.

"I expect she has gone to look at father's grave," said Constance.

"Oh!" muttered Samuel apologetically.

Constance was mistaken. Before reaching the church, Mrs Baines deviated to the right, got into Brougham Street and thence, by Acre Lane, into Oldcastle Street, whose steep she climbed. Now, Oldcastle Street ends at the top of St Luke's Square, and from the corner Mrs Baines had an excellent view of the signboard. It being Thursday afternoon, scarce a soul was about. She returned to her daughter's by the same extraordinary route, and said not a word on entering. But she was markedly cheerful.

The waggonette came after tea, and Mrs Baines made her final preparations to depart. The visit had proved a wonderful success; it would have been utterly perfect if Samuel had not marred it at the very door of the waggonette. Somehow, he contrived to be talking of Christmas. Only a person of Samuel's native clumsiness would have mentioned Christmas in July.

"You know you'll spend Christmas with us!" said he into the waggonette.

"Indeed I shan't!" replied Mrs Baines. "Aunt Harriet and I will expect you at Axe. We've already settled that."

Mr Povey bridled. "Oh no!" he protested, hurt by this summariness.

Having had no relatives, except his cousin the confectioner, for many years, he had dreamt of at last establishing a family Christmas under his own roof, and the dream was dear to him.

Mrs Baines said nothing. "We couldn't possibly leave the shop," said Mr Povey.

"Nonsense!" Mrs Baines retorted, putting her lips together. "Christmas Day is on a Monday."

The waggonette in starting jerked her head towards the door and set all her curls shaking. No white in those curls yet, scarcely a touch of grey!

"I shall take good care we don't go there anyway," Mr Povey mumbled, in his heat, half to himself and half to Constance.

He had stained the brightness of the day.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTMAS AND THE FUTURE

I

Mr Povey was playing a hymn tune on the harmonium, it having been decided that no one should go to chapel. Constance, in mourning, with a white apron over her dress, sat on a hassock in front of the fire; and near her, in a rocking-chair, Mrs Baines swayed very gently to and fro. The weather was extremely cold. Mr Povey's mittened hands were blue and red; but, like many shopkeepers, he had apparently grown almost insensible to vagaries of temperature. Although the fire was immense and furious, its influence, owing to the fact that the medieval grate was designed to heat the flue rather than the room, seemed to die away at the borders of the fender. Constance could not have been much closer to it without being a salamander. The era of good old-fashioned Christmases, so agreeably picturesque for the poor, was not yet at an end.

Yes, Samuel Povey had won the battle concerning the *locus* of the family Christmas. But he had received the help of a formidable ally, death. Mrs Harriet Maddack had passed away, after an operation, leaving her house and her money to her sister. The solemn rite of her interment had deeply affected all the respectability of the town of Axe, where the late Mr Maddack had been a figure of consequence; it had even shut up the shop in St Luke's Square for a whole day. It was such a funeral as Aunt Harriet herself would have approved, a tremendous ceremonial which left on the crushed mind an ineffaceable, intricate impression of shiny cloth, crape, horses with arching necks and long manes, the drawl of parsons, cake, port, sighs, and Christian submission to the inscrutable decrees of Providence. Mrs Baines had borne herself with unnatural calmness until the funeral was over: and then Constance perceived that the remembered mother of her girlhood existed no longer. For the majority of human souls it would have been easier to love a virtuous principle, or a mountain, than to love Aunt Harriet, who was assuredly less a woman than an institution. But Mrs Baines had loved her, and she had been the one person to whom Mrs Baines looked for support and guidance. When she died, Mrs Baines paid the tribute of respect with the last hoarded remains of her proud fortitude, and weepingly confessed that the unconquerable had been conquered, the inexhaustible exhausted; and became old with whitening hair.

She had persisted in her refusal to spend Christmas in Bursley, but both Constance and Samuel knew that the resistance was only formal. She soon yielded. When Constance's second new servant took it into her head to leave a week before Christmas, Mrs Baines might have pointed the finger of Providence at work again, and this time in her favour. But no! With amazing pliancy she suggested that she should bring one of her own servants to "tide Constance over" Christmas. She was met with all the forms of loving solicitude, and she found that her daughter and son-in-law had "turned out of" the state bedroom in her favour. Intensely flattered by this attention (which was Mr Povey's magnanimous idea), she nevertheless protested strongly. Indeed she "would not hear of it."

"Now, mother, don't be silly," Constance had said firmly. "You don't expect us to be at all the trouble of moving back again, do you?" And Mrs Baines had surrendered in tears.

Thus had come Christmas. Perhaps it was fortunate that, the Axe servant being not quite the ordinary servant, but a benefactor where a benefactor was needed, both Constance and her mother thought it well to occupy themselves in household work, "sparing" the benefactor as much as possible. Hence Constance's white apron.

"There he is!" said Mr Povey, still playing, but with his eye on the street.

Constance sprang up eagerly. Then there was a knock on the door. Constance opened, and an icy blast swept into the room. The postman stood on the steps, his instrument for knocking (like a drumstick) in one hand, a large bundle of letters in the other, and a yawning bag across the pit of his stomach.

"Merry Christmas, ma'am!" cried the postman, trying to keep warm by cheerfulness.

Constance, taking the letters, responded, while Mr Povey, playing the harmonium with his right hand, drew half a crown from his pocket with the left.

"Here you are!" he said, giving it to Constance, who gave it to the postman.

Fan, who had been keeping her muzzle warm with the extremity of her tail on the sofa, jumped down to superintend the transaction.

"Brrr!" vibrated Mr Povey as Constance shut the door.

"What lots!" Constance exclaimed, rushing to the fire. "Here, mother! Here, Sam!"

The girl had resumed possession of the woman's body.

Though the Baines family had few friends (sustained hospitality being little practised in those days) they had, of course, many acquaintances, and, like other families, they counted their Christmas cards as an Indian counts scalps. The tale was satisfactory. There were between thirty and forty envelopes. Constance extracted Christmas cards rapidly, reading their contents aloud, and then propping them up on the mantelpiece. Mrs Baines assisted. Fan dealt with the envelopes on the floor. Mr Povey, to prove that his soul was above toys and gew-gaws, continued to play the harmonium.

"Oh, mother!" Constance murmured in a startled, hesitant voice, holding an envelope.

“What is it, my chuck?”

“It’s—”

The envelope was addressed to “Mrs and Miss Baines” in large, perpendicular, dashing characters which Constance instantly recognized as Sophia’s. The stamps were strange, the postmark “Paris.” Mrs Baines leaned forward and looked.

“Open it, child,” she said.

The envelope contained an English Christmas card of a common type, a spray of holly with greetings, and on it was written, “I do hope this will reach you on Christmas morning. Fondest love.” No signature, nor address.

Mrs Baines took it with a trembling hand, and adjusted her spectacles. She gazed at it a long time.

“And it has done!” she said, and wept.

She tried to speak again, but not being able to command herself, held forth the card to Constance and jerked her head in the direction of Mr Povey. Constance rose and put the card on the keyboard of the harmonium.

“Sophia!” she whispered.

Mr Povey stopped playing. “Dear, dear!” he muttered.

Fan, perceiving that nobody was interested in her feats, suddenly stood still.

Mrs Baines tried once more to speak, but could not. Then, her ringlets shaking beneath the band of her weeds, she found her feet, stepped to the harmonium, and, with a movement almost convulsive, snatched the card from Mr Povey, and returned to her chair.

Mr Povey abruptly left the room, followed by Fan. Both the women were in tears, and he was tremendously surprised to discover a dangerous lump in his own throat. The beautiful and imperious vision of Sophia, Sophia as she had left them, innocent, wayward, had swiftly risen up before him and made even him a woman too! Yet he had never liked Sophia. The awful secret wound in the family pride revealed itself to him as never before, and he felt intensely the mother’s tragedy, which she carried in her breast as Aunt Harriet had carried a cancer.

At dinner he said suddenly to Mrs Baines, who still wept: “Now, mother, you must cheer up, you know.”

“Yes, I must,” she said quickly. And she did so.

Neither Samuel nor Constance saw the card again. Little was said. There was nothing to say. As Sophia had given no address she must be still ashamed of her situation. But she had thought of her mother and sister. She . . . she did not even know that Constance was married . . . What sort of a place was Paris? To Bursley, Paris was nothing but the site of a great exhibition which had recently closed.

Through the influence of Mrs Baines a new servant was found for Constance in a village near Axe—a raw, comely girl who had never been in a “place.” And through the post it was arranged that this innocent should come to the cave on the thirty-first of December. In obedience to the safe rule that servants should never be allowed to meet for the interchange of opinions, Mrs Baines decided to leave with her own servant on the thirtieth. She would not be persuaded to spend the New Year in the Square. On the twenty-ninth poor Aunt Maria died all of a sudden in her cottage in Brougham Street. Everybody was duly distressed, and in particular Mrs Baines’s demeanour under this affliction showed the perfection of correctness. But she caused it to be understood that she should not remain for the funeral. Her nerves would be unequal to the ordeal; and, moreover, her servant must not stay to corrupt the new girl, nor could Mrs Baines think of sending her servant to Axe in advance, to spend several days in idle gossip with her colleague.

This decision took the backbone out of Aunt Maria’s funeral, which touched the extreme of modesty; a hearse and a one-horse coach. Mr Povey was glad, because he happened to be very busy. An hour before his mother-in-law’s departure he came into the parlour with the proof of a poster.

“What is that, Samuel?” asked Mrs Baines, not dreaming of the blow that awaited her.

“It’s for my first Annual Sale,” replied Mr Povey with false tranquillity.

Mrs Baines merely tossed her head. Constance, happily for Constance, was not present at this final defeat of the old order. Had she been there, she would certainly not have known where to look.

II

“Forty next birthday!” Mr Povey exclaimed one day, with an expression and in a tone that were at once mock-serious and serious. This was on his thirty-ninth birthday.

Constance was startled. She had, of course, been aware that they were getting older, but she had never realized the phenomenon. Though customers occasionally remarked that Mr Povey was stouter, and though when she helped him to measure himself for a new suit of clothes the tape proved the fact, he had not changed for her. She knew that she too had become somewhat stouter; but for herself, she remained exactly the same Constance. Only by recalling dates and by calculations could she really grasp that she had been married a little over six years and not a little over six months. She had to admit that, if Samuel would be forty next birthday, she would be twenty-seven next birthday. But it would not be a real twenty-seven; nor would Sam’s forty be a real forty, like other people’s twenty-sevens and forties. Not long since she had been in the

habit of regarding a man of forty as senile, as practically in his grave.

She reflected, and the more she reflected the more clearly she saw that after all the almanacs had not lied. Look at Fan! Yes, it must be five years since the memorable morning when doubt first crossed the minds of Samuel and Constance as to Fan's moral principles. Samuel's enthusiasm for dogs was equalled by his ignorance of the dangers to which a young female of temperament may be exposed, and he was much disturbed as doubt developed into certainty. Fan, indeed, was the one being who did not suffer from shock and who had no fears as to the results. The animal, having a pure mind, was bereft of modesty. Sundry enormities had she committed, but none to rank with this one! The result was four quadrupeds recognizable as fox-terriers. Mr Povey breathed again. Fan had had more luck than she deserved, for the result might have been simply anything. Her owners forgave her and disposed of these fruits of iniquity, and then married her lawfully to a husband who was so high up in the world that he could demand a dowry. And now Fan was a grandmother, with fixed ideas and habits, and a son in the house, and various grandchildren scattered over the town. Fan was a sedate and disillusioned dog. She knew the world as it was, and in learning it she had taught her owners above a bit.

Then there was Maggie Hollins. Constance could still vividly recall the self-consciousness with which she had one day received Maggie and the heir of the Hollinses; but it was a long time ago. After staggering half the town by the production of this infant (of which she nearly died) Maggie allowed the angels to waft it away to heaven, and everybody said that she ought to be very thankful—at her age. Old women dug up out of their minds forgotten histories of the eccentricities of the goddess Lucina. Mrs Baines was most curiously interested; she talked freely to Constance, and Constance began to see what an incredible town Bursley had always been—and she never suspected it! Maggie was now mother of other children, and the draggled, lame mistress of a drunken home, and looked sixty. Despite her prophecy, her husband had conserved his "habits." The Poveys ate all the fish they could, and sometimes more than they enjoyed, because on his sober days Hollins invariably started his round at the shop, and Constance had to buy for Maggie's sake. The worst of the worthless husband was that he seldom failed to be cheery and polite. He never missed asking after the health of Mrs Baines. And when Constance replied that her mother was "pretty well considering," but that she would not come over to Bursley again until the Axe railway was opened, as she could not stand the drive, he would shake his grey head and be sympathetically gloomy for an instant.

All these changes in six years! The almanacs were in the right of it.

But nothing had happened to her. Gradually she had obtained a sure ascendency over her mother, yet without seeking it, merely as the outcome of time's influences on her and on her mother respectively. Gradually she had gained skill and use in the management of her household and of her share of the shop, so that these machines ran smoothly and effectively and a sudden contretemps no longer frightened her. Gradually she had constructed a chart of Samuel's individuality, with the submerged rocks and perilous currents all carefully marked, so that she could now voyage unalarmed in those seas. But nothing happened. Unless their visits to Buxton could be called happenings! Decidedly the visit to Buxton was the one little hill that rose out of the level plain of the year. They had formed the annual habit of going to Buxton for ten days. They had a way of saying:. "Yes, we always go to Buxton. We went there for our honeymoon, you know." They had become confirmed Buxtonites, with views concerning St Anne's Terrace, the Broad Walk and Peel's Cavern. They could not dream of deserting their Buxton. It was the sole possible resort. Was it not the highest town in England? Well, then! They always stayed at the same lodgings, and grew to be special favourites of the landlady, who whispered of them to all her other guests as having come to her house for their honeymoon, and as never missing a year, and as being most respectable, superior people in quite a large way of business. Each year they walked out of Buxton station behind their luggage on a truck, full of joy and pride because they knew all the landmarks, and the lie of all the streets, and which were the best shops.

At the beginning, the notion of leaving the shop to hired custody had seemed almost fantastic, and the preparations for absence had been very complicated. Then it was that Miss Insull had detached herself from the other young lady assistants as a creature who could be absolutely trusted. Miss Insull was older than Constance; she had a bad complexion, and she was not clever, but she was one of your reliable ones. The six years had witnessed the slow, steady rise of Miss Insull. Her employers said "Miss Insull" in a tone quite different from that in which they said "Miss Hawkins" or "Miss Dadd." "Miss Insull" meant the end of a discussion. "Better tell Miss Insull." "Miss Insull will see to that." "I shall ask Miss Insull." Miss Insull slept in the house ten nights every year. Miss Insull had been called into consultation when it was decided to engage a fourth hand in the shape of an apprentice.

Trade had improved in the point of excellence. It was now admitted to be good—a rare honour for trade! The coal-mining boom was at its height, and colliers, in addition to getting drunk, were buying American organs and expensive bull-terriers. Often they would come to the shop to purchase cloth for coats for their dogs. And they would have good cloth. Mr Povey did not like this. One day a butty chose for his dog the best cloth of Mr Povey's shop—at 12*s*. a yard. "Will ye make it up? I've gotten th' measurements," asked the collier. "No, I won't!" said Mr Povey, hotly. "And what's more, I won't sell you the cloth either! Cloth at 12*s*. a yard on a dog's back indeed! I'll thank you to get out of my shop!" The incident became historic, in the Square. It finally established that Mr Povey was a worthy son-in-law and a solid and successful man. It

vindicated the old pre-eminence of “Baines’s.” Some surprise was expressed that Mr Povey showed no desire nor tendency towards entering the public life of the town. But he never would, though a keen satirical critic of the Local Board in private. And at the chapel he remained a simple private worshipper, refusing stewardships and trusteeships.

III

Was Constance happy? Of course there was always something on her mind, something that had to be dealt with, either in the shop or in the house, something to employ all the skill and experience which she had acquired. Her life had much in it of laborious tedium—tedium never-ending and monotonous. And both she and Samuel worked consistently hard, rising early, “pushing forward,” as the phrase ran, and going to bed early from sheer fatigue; week after week and month after month as season changed imperceptibly into season. In June and July it would happen to them occasionally to retire before the last silver of dusk was out of the sky. They would lie in bed and talk placidly of their daily affairs. There would be a noise in the street below. “Vaults closing!” Samuel would say, and yawn. “Yes, it’s quite late,” Constance would say. And the Swiss clock would rapidly strike eleven on its coil of resonant wire. And then, just before she went to sleep, Constance might reflect upon her destiny, as even the busiest and smoothest women do, and she would decide that it was kind. Her mother’s gradual decline and lonely life at Axe saddened her. The cards which came now and then at extremely long intervals from Sophia had been the cause of more sorrow than joy. The naïve ecstasies of her girlhood had long since departed—the price paid for experience and self-possession and a true vision of things. The vast inherent melancholy of the universe did not exempt her. But as she went to sleep she would be conscious of a vague contentment. The basis of this contentment was the fact that she and Samuel comprehended and esteemed each other, and made allowances for each other. Their characters had been tested and had stood the test. Affection, love, was not to them a salient phenomenon in their relations. Habit had inevitably dulled its glitter. It was like a flavouring, scarce remarked; but had it been absent, how they would have turned from that dish!

Samuel never, or hardly ever, set himself to meditate upon the problem whether or not life had come up to his expectations. But he had, at times, strange sensations which he did not analyse, and which approached nearer to ecstasy than any feeling of Constance’s. Thus, when he was in one of his dark furies, molten within and black without, the sudden thought of his wife’s unalterable benignant calm, which nothing could overthrow, might strike him into a wondering cold. For him she was astoundingly feminine. She would put flowers on the mantelpiece, and then, hours afterwards, in the middle of a meal, ask him unexpectedly what he thought of her “garden”; and he gradually divined that a perfunctory reply left her unsatisfied; she wanted a genuine opinion; a genuine opinion mattered to her. Fancy calling flowers on a mantelpiece a “garden”! How charming, how childlike! Then she had a way, on Sunday mornings, when she descended to the parlour all ready for chapel, of shutting the door at the foot of the stairs with a little bang, shaking herself, and turning round swiftly as if for his inspection, as if saying: “Well, what about this? Will this do?” A phenomenon always associated in his mind with the smell of kid gloves! Invariably she asked him about the colours and cut of her dresses. Would he prefer this, or that? He could not take such questions seriously until one day he happened to hint, merely hint, that he was not a thorough-going admirer of a certain new dress—it was her first new dress after the definite abandonment of crinolines. She never wore it again. He thought she was not serious at first, and remonstrated against a joke being carried too far. She said: “It’s not a bit of use you talking, I shan’t wear it again.” And then he so far appreciated her seriousness as to refrain, by discretion, from any comment. The incident affected him for days. It flattered him; it thrilled him; but it baffled him. Strange that a woman subject to such caprices should be so sagacious, capable, and utterly reliable as Constance was! For the practical and commonsense side of her eternally compelled his admiration. The very first example of it—her insistence that the simultaneous absence of both of them from the shop for half an hour or an hour twice a day would not mean the immediate downfall of the business—had remained in his mind ever since. Had she not been obstinate—in her benevolent way—against the old superstition which he had acquired from his employers, they might have been eating separately to that day. Then her handling of her mother during the months of the siege of Paris, when Mrs Baines was convinced that her sinful daughter was in hourly danger of death, had been extraordinarily fine, he considered. And the sequel, a card for Constance’s birthday, had completely justified her attitude.

Sometimes some blundering fool would jovially exclaim to them:

“What about that baby?”

Or a woman would remark quietly: “I often feel sorry you’ve no children.”

And they would answer that really they did not know what they would do if there was a baby. What with the shop and one thing or another . . . ! And they were quite sincere.

IV

It is remarkable what a little thing will draw even the most regular and serious people from the deep groove

of their habits. One morning in March, a boneshaker, an affair on two equal wooden wheels joined by a bar of iron, in the middle of which was a wooden saddle, disturbed the gravity of St Luke's Square. True, it was probably the first boneshaker that had ever attacked the gravity of St Luke's Square. It came out of the shop of Daniel Povey, the confectioner and baker, and Samuel Povey's celebrated cousin, in Boulton Terrace. Boulton Terrace formed nearly a right angle With the Baines premises, and at the corner of the angle Wedgwood Street and King Street left the Square. The boneshaker was brought forth by Dick Povey, the only son of Daniel, now aged eleven years, under the superintendence of his father, and the Square soon perceived that Dick had a natural talent for breaking-in an untrained boneshaker. After a few attempts he could remain on the back of the machine for at least ten yards, and his feats had the effect of endowing St Luke's Square with the attractiveness of a circus. Samuel Povey watched with candid interest from the ambush of his door, while the unfortunate young lady assistants, though aware of the performance that was going on, dared not stir from the stove. Samuel was tremendously tempted to sally out boldly, and chat with his cousin about the toy; he had surely a better tight to do so than any other tradesman in the Square, since he was of the family; but his diffidence prevented him from moving. Presently Daniel Povey and Dick went to the top of the Square with the machine, opposite Holl's, and Dick, being carefully installed in the saddle, essayed to descend the gentle paven slopes of the Square. He failed time after time; the machine had an astonishing way of turning round, running uphill, and then lying calmly on its side. At this point of Dick's life-history every shop-door in the Square was occupied by an audience. At last the boneshaker displayed less unwillingness to obey, and lo! in a moment Dick was riding down the Square, and the spectators held their breath as if he had been Blondin crossing Niagara. Every second he ought to have fallen off, but he contrived to keep upright. Already he had accomplished twenty yards—thirty yards! It was a miracle that he was performing! The transit continued, and seemed to occupy hours. And then a faint hope rose in the breast of the watchers that the prodigy might arrive at the bottom of the Square. His speed was increasing with his "nack." But the Square was enormous, boundless. Samuel Povey gazed at the approaching phenomenon, as a bird at a serpent, with bulging, beady eyes. The child's speed went on increasing and his path grew straighter. Yes, he would arrive; he would do it! Samuel Povey involuntarily lifted one leg in his nervous tension. And now the hope that Dick would arrive became a fear, as his pace grew still more rapid. Everybody lifted one leg, and gaped. And the intrepid child surged on, and, finally victorious, crashed into the pavement in front of Samuel at the rate of quite six miles an hour.

Samuel picked him up, unscathed. And somehow this picking up of Dick invested Samuel with importance, gave him a share in the glory of the feat itself.

Daniel Povey came running and joyous. "Not so bad for a start, eh?" exclaimed the great Daniel. Though by no means a simple man, his pride in his offspring sometimes made him a little naïve.

Father and son explained the machine to Samuel, Dick incessantly repeating the exceedingly strange truth that if you felt you were falling to your right you must turn to your right and *vice versa*. Samuel found himself suddenly admitted, as it were, to the inner fellowship of the boneshaker, exalted above the rest of the Square. In another adventure more thrilling events occurred. The fair-haired Dick was one of those dangerous, frenzied madcaps who are born without fear. The secret of the machine had been revealed to him in his recent transit, and he was silently determining to surpass himself. Precariously balanced, he descended the Square again, frowning hard, his teeth set, and actually managed to swerve into King Street. Constance, in the parlour, saw an incomprehensible winged thing fly past the window. The cousins Povey sounded an alarm and protest and ran in pursuit; for the gradient of King Street is, in the strict sense, steep. Half-way down King Street Dick was travelling at twenty miles an hour, and heading straight for the church, as though he meant to disestablish it and perish. The main gate of the churchyard was open, and that affrighting child, with a lunatic's luck, whizzed safely through the portals into God's acre. The cousins Povey discovered him lying on a green grave, clothed in pride. His first words were: "Dad, did you pick my cap up?" The symbolism of the amazing ride did not escape the Square; indeed, it was much discussed.

This incident led to a friendship between the cousins. They formed a habit of meeting in the Square for a chat. The meetings were the subject of comment, for Samuel's relations with the greater Daniel had always been of the most distant. It was understood that Samuel disapproved of Mrs Daniel Povey even more than the majority of people disapproved of her. Mrs Daniel Povey, however, was away from home; probably, had she not been, Samuel would not even have gone to the length of joining Daniel on the neutral ground of the open Square. But having once broken the ice, Samuel was glad to be on terms of growing intimacy with his cousin. The friendship flattered him, for Daniel, despite his wife, was a figure in a world larger than Samuel's; moreover, it consecrated his position as the equal of no matter what tradesman (apprentice though he had been), and also he genuinely liked and admired Daniel rather to his own astonishment.

Everyone liked Daniel Povey; he was a favourite among all ranks. The leading confectioner, a member of the Local Board, and a sidesman at St Luke's, he was, and had been for twenty-five years, very prominent in the town. He was a tall, handsome man, with a trimmed, greying beard, a jolly smile, and a flashing, dark eye. His good humour seemed to be permanent. He had dignity without the slightest stiffness; he was welcomed by his equals and frankly adored by his inferiors. He ought to have been Chief Bailiff, for he was rich enough; but there intervened a mysterious obstacle between Daniel Povey and the supreme honour, a

scarcely tangible impediment which could not be definitely stated. He was capable, honest, industrious, successful, and an excellent speaker; and if he did not belong to the austerer section of society, if, for example, he thought nothing of dropping into the Tiger for a glass of beer, or of using an oath occasionally, or of telling a facetious story—well, in a busy, broad-minded town of thirty thousand inhabitants, such proclivities are no bar whatever to perfect esteem. But—how is one to phrase it without wronging Daniel Povey? He was entirely moral; his views were unexceptionable. The truth is that, for the ruling classes of Bursley, Daniel Povey was just a little too fanatical a worshipper of the god Pan. He was one of the remnant who had kept alive the great Pan tradition from the days of the Regency through the vast, arid Victorian expanse of years. The flighty character of his wife was regarded by many as a judgement upon him for the robust Rabelaisianism of his more private conversation, for his frank interest in, his eternal preoccupation with, aspects of life and human activity which, though essential to the divine purpose, are not openly recognized as such—even by Daniel Poveys. It was not a question of his conduct; it was a question of the cast of his mind. If it did not explain his friendship with the rector of St Luke's, it explained his departure from the Primitive Methodist connexion, to which the Poveys as a family had belonged since Primitive Methodism was created in Turnhill in 1807.

Daniel Povey had a way of assuming that every male was boiling over with interest in the sacred cult of Pan. The assumption, though sometimes causing inconvenience at first, usually conquered by virtue of its inherent truthfulness. Thus it fell out with Samuel. Samuel had not suspected that Pan had silken cords to draw him. He had always averted his eyes from the god—that is to say, within reason. Yet now Daniel, on perhaps a couple of fine mornings a week, in full Square, with Fan sitting behind on the cold stones, and Mr Critchlow ironic at his door in a long white apron, would entertain Samuel Povey for half an hour with Pan's most intimate lore, and Samuel Povey would not blench. He would, on the contrary, stand up to Daniel like a little man, and pretend with all his might to be, potentially, a perfect arch-priest of the god. Daniel taught him a lot; turned over the page of life for him, as it were, and, showing the reverse side, seemed to say: "You were missing all that." Samuel gazed upwards at the handsome long nose and rich lips of his elder cousin, so experienced, so agreeable, so renowned, so esteemed, so philosophic, and admitted to himself that he had lived to the age of forty in a state of comparative boobyism. And then he would gaze downwards at the faint patch of flour on Daniel's right leg, and conceive that life was, and must be, life.

Not many weeks after his initiation into the cult he was startled by Constance's preoccupied face one evening. Now, a husband of six years' standing, to whom it has not happened to become a father, is not easily startled by such a face as Constance wore. Years ago he had frequently been startled, had frequently lived in suspense for a few days. But he had long since grown impervious to these alarms. And now he was startled again—but as a man may be startled who is not altogether surprised at being startled. And seven endless days passed, and Samuel and Constance glanced at each other like guilty things, whose secret refuses to be kept. Then three more days passed, and another three. Then Samuel Povey remarked, in a firm, masculine, fact-fronting tone:

"Oh, there's no doubt about it!"

And they glanced at each other like conspirators who have lighted a fuse and cannot take refuge in flight. Their eyes said continually, with a delicious, an enchanting mixture of ingenuous modesty and fearful joy:

"Well, we've gone and done it!"

There it was, the incredible, incomprehensible future—coming!

Samuel had never correctly imagined the matter of its heralding. He had imagined in his early simplicity that one day Constance, blushing, might put her mouth to his ear and whisper—something positive. It had not occurred in the least like that. But things are so obstinately, so incurably unsentimental.

"I think we ought to drive over and tell mother, on Sunday," said Constance.

His impulse was to reply, in his grand, offhand style: "Oh, a letter will do!"

But he checked himself and said, with careful deference: "You think that will be better than writing?"

All was changed. He braced every fibre to meet destiny, and to help Constance to meet it.

The weather threatened on Sunday. He went to Axe without Constance. His cousin drove him there in a dog-cart, and he announced that he should walk home, as the exercise would do him good. During the drive Daniel, in whom he had not confided, chattered as usual, and Samuel pretended to listen with the same attitude as usual; but secretly he despised Daniel for a man who has got something not of the first importance on the brain. His perspective was truer than Daniel's.

He walked home, as he had decided, over the wavy moorland of the county dreaming in the heart of England. Night fell on him in mid-career, and he was tired. But the earth, as it whirled through naked space, whirled up the moon for him, and he pressed on at a good speed. A wind from Arabia wandering cooled his face. And at last, over the brow of Toft End, he saw suddenly the Five Towns a-twinkle on their little hills down in the vast amphitheatre. And one of those lamps was Constance's lamp—one, somewhere. He lived, then. He entered into the shadow of nature. The mysteries made him solemn. What! A boneshaker, his cousin, and then this!

"Well, I'm damned! Well, I'm damned!" he kept repeating, he who never swore.

CHAPTER III

CYRIL

I

Constance stood at the large, many-paned window in the parlour. She was stouter. Although always plump, her figure had been comely, with a neat, well-marked waist. But now the shapeliness had gone; the waistline no longer existed, and there were no more crinolines to create it artificially. An observer not under the charm of her face might have been excused for calling her fat and lumpy. The face, grave, kind, and expectant, with its radiant, fresh cheeks, and the rounded softness of its curves, atoned for the figure. She was nearly twenty-nine years of age.

It was late in October. In Wedgwood Street, next to Boulton Terrace, all the little brown houses had been pulled down to make room for a palatial covered market, whose foundations were then being dug. This destruction exposed a vast area of sky to the north-east. A great dark cloud with an untidy edge rose massively out of the depths and curtained off the tender blue of approaching dusk; while in the west, behind Constance, the sun was setting in calm and gorgeous melancholy on the Thursday hush of the town. It was one of those afternoons which gather up all the sadness of the moving earth and transform it into beauty.

Samuel Povey turned the corner from Wedgwood Street, and crossed King Street obliquely to the front-door, which Constance opened. He seemed tired and anxious.

"Well?" demanded Constance, as he entered.

"She's no better. There's no getting away from it, she's worse. I should have stayed, only I knew you'd be worrying. So I caught the three-fifty."

"How is that Mrs Gilchrist shaping as a nurse?"

"She's very good," said Samuel, with conviction. "Very good!"

"What a blessing! I suppose you didn't happen to see the doctor?"

"Yes, I did."

"What did he say to you?"

Samuel gave a deprecating gesture. "Didn't say anything particular. With dropsy, at that stage, you know . . ."

Constance had returned to the window, her expectancy apparently unappeased.

"I don't like the look of that cloud," she murmured.

"What! Are they out still?" Samuel inquired, taking off his overcoat.

"Here they are!" cried Constance. Her features suddenly transfigured, she sprang to the door, pulled it open, and descended the steps.

A perambulator was being rapidly pushed up the slope by a breathless girl.

"Amy," Constance gently protested, "I told you not to venture far."

"I hurried all I could, mum, soon as I seed that cloud," the girl puffed, with the air of one who is seriously thankful to have escaped a great disaster.

Constance dived into the recesses of the perambulator and extricated from its cocoon the centre of the universe, and scrutinized him with quiet passion, and then rushed with him into the house, though not a drop of rain had yet fallen.

"Precious!" exclaimed Amy, in ecstasy, her young virginal eyes following him till he disappeared. Then she wheeled away the perambulator, which now had no more value or interest than an egg-shell. It was necessary to take it right round to the Brougham Street yard entrance, past the front of the closed shop.

Constance sat down on the horsehair sofa and hugged and kissed her prize before removing his bonnet.

"Here's Daddy!" she said to him as if imparting strange and rapturous tidings. "Here's Daddy come back from hanging up his coat in the passage! Daddy rubbing his hands!" And then, with a swift transition of voice and features: "Do look at him, Sam!"

Samuel, preoccupied, stooped forward. "Oh, you little scoundrel! Oh, you little scoundrel!" he greeted the baby, advancing his finger towards the baby's nose.

The baby, who had hitherto maintained a passive indifference to external phenomena, lifted elbows and toes, blew bubbles from his tiny mouth, and stared at the finger with the most ravishing, roguish smile, as though saying:"I know that great sticking-out limb, and there is a joke about it which no one but me can see, and which is my secret joy that you shall never share."

“Tea ready?” Samuel asked, resuming his gravity and his ordinary pose.

“You must give the girl time to take her things off,” said Constance. “We’ll have the table drawn away from the fire, and baby can lie on his shawl on the hearthrug while we’re having tea.” Then to the baby, in rapture: “And play with his toys; all his nice, nice toys!”

“You know Miss Insull is staying for tea?”

Constance, her head bent over the baby, who formed a white patch on her comfortable brown frock, nodded without speaking.

Samuel Povey, walking to and fro, began to enter into details of his hasty journey to Axe. Old Mrs Baines, having beheld her grandson, was preparing to quit this world. Never again would she exclaim, in her brusque tone of genial ruthlessness: “Fiddlesticks!” The situation was very difficult and distressing, for Constance could not leave her baby, and she would not, until the last urgency, run the risks of a journey with him to Axe. He was being weaned. In any case Constance could not have undertaken the nursing of her mother. A nurse had to be found. Mr Povey had discovered one in the person of Mrs Gilchrist, the second wife of a farmer at Malpas in Cheshire, whose first wife had been a sister of the late John Baines. All the credit of Mrs Gilchrist was due to Samuel Povey. Mrs Baines fretted seriously about Sophia, who had given no sign of life for a very long time. Mr Povey went to Manchester and ascertained definitely from the relatives of Scales that nothing was known of the pair. He did not go to Manchester especially on this errand. About once in three weeks, on Tuesdays, he had to visit the Manchester warehouses; but the tracking of Scales’s relatives cost him so much trouble and time that, curiously, he came to believe that he had gone to Manchester one Tuesday for no other end. Although he was very busy indeed in the shop, he flew over to Axe and back whenever he possibly could to the neglect of his affairs. He was glad to do all that was in his power; even if he had not done it graciously his sensitive, tyrannic conscience would have forced him to do it. But nevertheless he felt rather virtuous, and worry and fatigue and loss of sleep intensified this sense of virtue.

“So that if there is any sudden change they will telegraph,” he finished to Constance.

She raised her head. The words, clinching what had led up to them, drew her from her dream and she saw, for a moment, her mother in an agony.

“But you don’t surely mean—?” she began, trying to disperse the painful vision as unjustified by the facts.

“My dear girl,” said Samuel, with head singing, and hot eyes, and a consciousness of high tension in every nerve of his body, “I simply mean that if there’s any sudden change they will telegraph.”

While they had tea, Samuel sitting opposite to his wife, and Miss Insull nearly against the wall (owing to the moving of the table), the baby rolled about on the hearthrug, which had been covered with a large soft woollen shawl, originally the property of his great-grandmother. He had no cares, no responsibilities. The shawl was so vast that he could not clearly distinguish objects beyond its confines. On it lay an indiarubber ball, an indiarubber doll, a rattle, and Fan. He vaguely recollected all four items, with their respective properties. The fire also was an old friend. He had occasionally tried to touch it, but a high bright fence always came in between. For ten months he had never spent a day without making experiments on this shifting universe in which he alone remained firm and stationary. The experiments were chiefly conducted out of idle amusement, but he was serious on the subject of food. Lately the behaviour of the universe in regard to his food had somewhat perplexed him, had indeed annoyed him. However, he was of a forgetful, happy disposition, and so long as the universe continued to fulfil its sole end as a machinery for the satisfaction, somehow, of his imperious desires, he was not inclined to remonstrate. He gazed at the flames and laughed, and laughed because he had laughed. He pushed the ball away and wriggled after it, and captured it with the assurance of practice. He tried to swallow the doll, and it was not until he had tried several times to swallow it that he remembered the failure of previous efforts and philosophically desisted. He rolled with a fearful shock, arms and legs in the air, against the mountainous flank of that mammoth Fan, and clutched at Fan’s ear. The whole mass of Fan upheaved and vanished from his view, and was instantly forgotten by him. He seized the doll and tried to swallow it, and repeated the exhibition of his skill with the ball. Then he saw the fire again and laughed. And so he existed for centuries: no responsibilities, no appetites; and the shawl was vast. Terrific operations went on over his head. Giants moved to and fro. Great vessels were carried off and great books were brought and deep voices rumbled regularly in the spaces beyond the shawl. But he remained oblivious. At last he became aware that a face was looking down at his. He recognized it, and immediately an uncomfortable sensation in his stomach disturbed him; he tolerated it for fifty years or so, and then he gave a little cry. Life had resumed its seriousness.

“Black alpaca. B quality. Width 20, t.a. 22 yards,” Miss Insull read out of a great book. She and Mr Povey were checking stock.

And Mr Povey responded. “Black alpaca B quality. Width 20, t.a. 22 yards. It wants ten minutes yet.” He had glanced at the clock.

“Does it?” said Constance, well knowing that it wanted ten minutes.

The baby did not guess that a high invisible god named Samuel Povey, whom nothing escaped, and who could do everything at once, was controlling his universe from an inconceivable distance. On the contrary, the baby was crying to himself. There is no God.

His weaning had reached a stage at which a baby really does not know what will happen next. The

annoyance had begun exactly three months after his first tooth, such being the rule of the gods, and it had grown more and more disconcerting. No sooner did he accustom himself to a new phenomenon than it mysteriously ceased, and an old one took its place which he had utterly forgotten. This afternoon his mother nursed him, but not until she had foolishly attempted to divert him from the seriousness of life by means of gewgaws of which he was sick. Still, once at her rich breast, he forgave and forgot all. He preferred her simple natural breast to more modern inventions. And he had no shame, no modesty. Nor had his mother. It was an indecent carouse at which his father and Miss Insull had to assist. But his father had shame. His father would have preferred that, as Miss Insull had kindly offered to stop and work on Thursday afternoon, and as the shop was chilly, the due rotation should have brought the bottle round at half-past five o'clock, and not the mother's breast. He was a self-conscious parent, rather apologetic to the world, rather apt to stand off and pretend that he had nothing to do with the affair; and he genuinely disliked that anybody should witness the intimate scene of *his* wife feeding *his* baby. Especially Miss Insull, that prim, dark, moustached spinster! He would not have called it an outrage on Miss Insull, to force her to witness the scene, but his idea approached within sight of the word.

Constance blandly offered herself to the child, with the unconscious primitive savagery of a young mother, and as the baby fed, thoughts of her own mother flitted to and fro ceaselessly like vague shapes over the deep sea of content which filled her mind. This illness of her mother's was abnormal, and the baby was now, for the first time perhaps, entirely normal in her consciousness. The baby was something which could be disturbed, not something which did disturb. What a change! What a change that had seemed impossible until its full accomplishment!

For months before the birth, she had glimpsed at nights and in other silent hours the tremendous upset. She had not allowed herself to be silly in advance; by temperament she was too sagacious, too well balanced for that; but she had had fitful instants of terror, when solid ground seemed to sink away from her, and imagination shook at what faced her. Instants only! Usually she could play the comedy of sensible calmness to almost perfection. Then the appointed time drew nigh. And still she smiled, and Samuel smiled. But the preparations, meticulous, intricate, revolutionary, belied their smiles. The intense resolve to keep Mrs Baines, by methods scrupulous or unscrupulous, away from Bursley until all was over, belied their smiles. And then the first pains, sharp, shocking, cruel, heralds of torture! But when they had withdrawn, she smiled again, palely. Then she was in bed, full of the sensation that the whole house was inverted and disorganized, hopelessly. And the doctor came into the room. She smiled at the doctor apologetically, foolishly, as if saying: "We all come to it. Here I am." She was calm without. Oh, but what a prey of abject fear within! "I am at the edge of the precipice," her thought ran; "in a moment I shall be over." And then the pains—not the heralds but the shattering army, endless, increasing in terror as they thundered across her. Yet she could think quite clearly: "Now I'm in the middle of it. This is *it*, the horror that I have not dared to look at. My life's in the balance. I may never get up again. All has at last come to pass. It seemed as if it would never come, as if this thing could not happen to *me*. But at last it has come to pass!"

Ah! Someone put the twisted end of a towel into her hand again—she had loosed it; and she pulled, pulled, enough to break cables. And then she shrieked. It was for pity. It was for someone to help her, at any rate to take notice of her. She was dying. Her soul was leaving her. And she was alone, panic-stricken, in the midst of a cataclysm a thousand times surpassing all that she had imagined of sickening horror. "I cannot endure this," she thought passionately. "It is impossible that I should be asked to endure this!" And then she wept; beaten, terrorized, smashed and riven. No common sense now! No wise calmness now! No self-respect now! Why, not even a woman now! Nothing but a kind of animalized victim! And then the supreme endless spasm, during which she gave up the ghost and bade good-bye to her very self . . .

She was lying quite comfortable in the soft bed; idle, silly; happiness forming like a thin crust over the lava of her anguish and her fright. And by her side was the soul that had fought its way out of her, ruthlessly; the secret disturber revealed to the light of morning. Curious to look at! Not like any baby that she had ever seen; red, creased, brutish! But—for some reason that she did not examine—she folded it in an immense tenderness.

Sam was by the bed, away from her eyes. She was so comfortable and silly that she could not move her head nor even ask him to come round to her eyes. She had to wait till he came.

In the afternoon the doctor returned, and astounded her by saying that hers had been an ideal confinement. She was too weary to rebuke him for a senseless, blind, callous old man. But she knew what she knew. "No one will ever guess," she thought, "no one ever can guess, what I've been through! Talk as you like. I *know*, now."

Gradually she had resumed cognizance of her household, perceiving that it was demoralized from top to bottom, and that when the time came to begin upon it she would not be able to settle where to begin, even supposing that the baby were not there to monopolize her attention. The task appalled her. Then she wanted to get up. Then she got up. What a blow to self-confidence! She went back to bed like a little scared rabbit to its hole, glad, glad to be on the soft pillows again. She said: "Yet the time must come when I shall be downstairs, and walking about and meeting people, and cooking and superintending the millinery." Well, it did come—except that she had to renounce the millinery to Miss Insull—but it was not the same. No, different! The baby pushed everything else on to another plane. He was a terrific intruder; not one minute of

her old daily life was left; he made no compromise whatever. If she turned away her gaze from him he might pop off into eternity and leave her.

And now she was calmly and sensibly giving him suck in presence of Miss Insull. She was used to his importance, to the fragility of his organism, to waking twice every night, to being fat. She was strong again. The convulsive twitching that for six months had worried her repose, had quite disappeared. The state of being a mother was normal, and the baby was so normal that she could not conceive the house without him.

All in ten months!

When the baby was installed in his cot for the night, she came downstairs and found Miss Insull and Samuel still working, and harder than ever, but at addition sums now. She sat down, leaving the door open at the foot of the stairs. She had embroidery in hand: a cap. And while Miss Insull and Samuel combined pounds, shillings, and pence, whispering at great speed, she bent over the delicate, intimate, wasteful handiwork, drawing the needle with slow exactitude. Then she would raise her head and listen.

"Excuse me," said Miss Insull, "I think I hear baby crying."

"And two are eight and three are eleven. He must cry," said Mr Povey, rapidly, without looking up.

The baby's parents did not make a practice of discussing their domestic existence even with Miss Insull; but Constance had to justify herself as a mother.

"I've made perfectly sure he's comfortable," said Constance. "He's only crying because he fancies he's neglected. And we think he can't begin too early to learn."

"How right you are!" said Miss Insull. "Two and carry three."

That distant, feeble, querulous, pitiful cry continued obstinately. It continued for thirty minutes. Constance could not proceed with her work. The cry disintegrated her will, dissolved her hard sagacity.

Without a word she crept upstairs, having carefully deposed the cap on her rocking-chair.

Mr Povey hesitated a moment and then bounded up after her, startling Fan. He shut the door on Miss Insull, but Fan was too quick for him. He saw Constance with her hand on the bedroom door.

"My dear girl," he protested, holding himself in. "Now what *are* you going to do?"

"I'm just listening," said Constance.

"Do be reasonable and come downstairs."

He spoke in a low voice, scarcely masking his nervous irritation, and tiptoed along the corridor towards her and up the two steps past the gas-burner. Fan followed, wagging her tail expectantly.

"Suppose he's not well?" Constance suggested.

"Pshaw!" Mr Povey exclaimed contemptuously. "You remember what happened last night and what you said!"

They argued, subduing their tones to the false semblance of goodwill, there in the closeness of the corridor. Fan, deceived, ceased to wag her tail and then trotted away. The baby's cry, behind the door, rose to a mysterious despairing howl, which had such an effect on Constance's heart that she could have walked through fire to reach the baby. But Mr Povey's will held her. And he rebelled, angry, hurt, resentful. Common sense, the ideal of mutual forbearance, had winged away from the excited pair. It would have assuredly ended in a quarrel with Samuel glaring at her in black fury from the other side of a bottomless chasm, had not Miss Insull most surprisingly burst up the stairs.

Mr Povey turned to face her, swallowing his emotion.

"A telegram!" said Miss Insull. "The postmaster brought it down himself—"

"What? Mr Derry?" asked Samuel, opening the telegram with an affectation of majesty.

"Yes. He said it was too late for delivery by rights. But as it seemed very important . . ."

Samuel scanned it and nodded gravely; then gave it to his wife, Tears came into her eyes.

"I'll get Cousin Daniel to drive me over at once," said Samuel, master of himself and of the situation.

"Wouldn't it be better to hire?" Constance suggested. She had a prejudice against Daniel.

Mr Povey shook his head. "He offered," he replied. "I can't refuse his offer."

"Put your thick overcoat on, dear," said Constance, in a dream, descending with him.

"I hope it isn't—" Miss Insull stopped.

"Yes, it is, Miss Insull," said Samuel deliberately.

In less than a minute he was gone.

Constance ran upstairs. But the cry had ceased. She turned the door-knob softly, slowly, and crept into the chamber. A nightlight made large shadows among the heavy mahogany and the crimson, tasselled rep in the close-curtained room. And between the bed and the ottoman (on which lay Samuel's newly-bought family Bible) the cot loomed in the shadows. She picked up the night-light and stole round the bed. Yes, he had decided to fall asleep. The hazard of death afar off had just defeated his devilish obstinacy. Fate had bested him. How marvellously soft and delicate that tear-stained cheek; how frail that tiny, tiny clenched hand! In Constance grief and joy were mystically united.

II

The drawing-room was full of visitors, in frocks of ceremony. The old drawing-room, but newly and

massively arranged with the finest Victorian furniture from dead Aunt Harriet's house at Axe; two "Canterburys," a large bookcase, a splendid scintillant table solid beyond lifting, intricately tortured chairs and armchairs! The original furniture of the drawing-room was now down in the parlour, making it grand. All the house breathed opulence; it was gorged with quiet, restrained expensiveness; the least considerable objects, in the most modest corners, were what Mrs Baines would have termed "good." Constance and Samuel had half of all Aunt Harriet's money and half of Mrs Baines's; the other half was accumulating for a hypothetical Sophia, Mr Critchlow being the trustee. The business continued to flourish. People knew that Samuel Povey was buying houses. Yet Samuel and Constance had not made friends; they had not, in the Five Towns phrase, "branched out socially," though they had very meetly branched out on subscription lists. They kept themselves to themselves (emphasizing the preposition). These guests were not their guests; they were the guests of Cyril.

He had been named Samuel because Constance would have him named after his father, and Cyril because his father secretly despised the name of Samuel; and he was called Cyril; "Master Cyril," by Amy, definite successor to Maggie. His mother's thoughts were on Cyril as long as she was awake. His father, when not planning Cyril's welfare, was earning money whose unique object could be nothing but Cyril's welfare. Cyril was the pivot of the house; every desire ended somewhere in Cyril. The shop existed now solely for him. And those houses that Samuel bought by private treaty, or with a shamefaced air at auctions—somehow they were aimed at Cyril. Samuel and Constance had ceased to be self-justifying beings; they never thought of themselves save as the parents of Cyril.

They realized this by no means fully. Had they been accused of monomania they would have smiled the smile of people confident in their common sense and their mental balance. Nevertheless, they were monomaniacs. Instinctively they concealed the fact as much as possible. They never admitted it even to themselves. Samuel, indeed, would often say: "That child is not everybody. That child must be kept in his place." Constance was always teaching him consideration for his father as the most important person in the household. Samuel was always teaching him consideration for his mother as the most important person in the household. Nothing was left undone to convince him that he was a cipher, a nonentity, who ought to be very glad to be alive. But he knew all about his importance. He knew that the entire town was his. He knew that his parents were deceiving themselves. Even when he was punished he well knew that it was because he was so important. He never imparted any portion of this knowledge to his parents; a primeval wisdom prompted him to retain it strictly in his own bosom.

He was four and a half years old, dark, like his father; handsome like his aunt, and tall for his age; not one of his features resembled a feature of his mother's, but sometimes he "had her look." From the capricious production of inarticulate sounds, and then a few monosyllables that described concrete things and obvious desires, he had gradually acquired an astonishing idiomatic command over the most difficult of Teutonic languages; there was nothing that he could not say. He could walk and run, was full of exact knowledge about God, and entertained no doubt concerning the special partiality of a minor deity called Jesus towards himself.

Now, this party was his mother's invention and scheme. His father, after flouting it, had said that if it was to be done at all, it should be done well, and had brought to the doing all his organizing skill. Cyril had accepted it at first—merely accepted it; but, as the day approached and the preparations increased in magnitude, he had come to look on it with favour, then with enthusiasm. His father having taken him to Daniel Povey's opposite, to choose cakes, he had shown, by his solemn and fastidious waverings, how seriously he regarded the affair.

Of course it had to occur on a Thursday afternoon. The season was summer, suitable for pale and fragile toilettes. And the eight children who sat round Aunt Harriet's great table glittered like the sun. Not Constance's specially provided napkins could hide that wealth and profusion of white lace and stitchery. Never in after-life are the genteel children of the Five Towns so richly clad as at the age of four or five years. Weeks of labour, thousands of cubic feet of gas, whole nights stolen from repose, eyesight, and general health, will disappear into the manufacture of a single frock that accidental jam may ruin in ten seconds. Thus it was in those old days; and thus it is today. Cyril's guests ranged in years from four to six; they were chiefly older than their host; this was a pity, it impaired his importance; but up to four years a child's sense of propriety, even of common decency, is altogether too unreliable for a respectable party.

Round about the outskirts of the table were the elders, ladies the majority; they also in their best, for they had to meet each other. Constance displayed a new dress, of crimson silk; after having mourned for her mother she had definitely abandoned the black which, by reason of her duties in the shop, she had constantly worn from the age of sixteen to within a few months of Cyril's birth; she never went into the shop now, except casually, on brief visits of inspection. She was still fat; the destroyer of her figure sat at the head of the table. Samuel kept close to her; he was the only male, until Mr Critchlow astonishingly arrived; among the company Mr Critchlow had a grand-niece. Samuel, if not in his best, was certainly not in his everyday suit. With his large frilled shirt-front, and small black tie, and his little black beard and dark face over that, he looked very nervous and self-conscious. He had not the habit of entertaining. Nor had Constance; but her benevolence ever bubbling up to the calm surface of her personality made self-consciousness impossible for her. Miss Insull was also present, in shopblack, "to help." Lastly there was Amy, now as the years passed slowly assuming the

character of a faithful retainer, though she was only twenty-three. An ugly, abrupt, downright girl, with convenient notions of pleasure! For she would rise early and retire late in order to contrive an hour to go out with Master Cyril; and to be allowed to put Master Cyril to bed was, really, her highest bliss.

All these elders were continually inserting arms into the fringe of fluffy children that surrounded the heaped table; removing dangerous spoons out of cups into saucers, replacing plates, passing cakes, spreading jam, whispering consolations, explanations, and sage counsel. Mr Critchlow, snow-white now but unbent, remarked that there was "a pretty cackle," and he sniffed. Although the window was slightly open, the air was heavy with the natural human odour which young children transpire. More than one mother, pressing her nose into a lacy mass, to whisper, inhaled that pleasant perfume with a voluptuous thrill.

Cyril, while attending steadily to the demands of his body, was in a mood which approached the ideal. Proud and radiant, he combined urbanity with a certain fine condescension. His bright eyes, and his manner of scraping up jam with a spoon, said: "I am the king of this party. This party is solely in my honour. I know that. We all know it. Still, I will pretend that we are equals, you and I." He talked about his picture-books to a young woman on his right named Jennie, aged four, pale, pretty, the belle in fact, and Mr Critchlow's grand-niece. The boy's attractiveness was indisputable; he could put on quite an aristocratic air. It was the most delicious sight to see them, Cyril and Jennie, so soft and delicate, so infantile on their piles of cushions and books, with their white socks and black shoes dangling far distant from the carpet; and yet so old, so self-contained! And they were merely an epitome of the whole table. The whole table was bathed in the charm and mystery of young years, of helpless fragility, gentle forms, timid elegance, unashamed instincts, and waking souls. Constance and Samuel were very satisfied; full of praise for other people's children, but with the reserve that of course Cyril was *hors concours*. They both really did believe, at that moment, that Cyril was, in some subtle way which they felt but could not define, superior to all other infants.

Someone, some officious relative of a visitor, began to pass a certain cake which had brown walls, a roof of coco-nut icing, and a yellow body studded with crimson globules. Not a conspicuously gorgeous cake, not a cake to which a catholic child would be likely to attach particular importance; a good, average cake! Who could have guessed that it stood, in Cyril's esteem, as the cake of cakes? He had insisted on his father buying it at Cousin Daniel's, and perhaps Samuel ought to have divined that for Cyril that cake was the gleam that an ardent spirit would follow through the wilderness. Samuel, however, was not a careful observer, and seriously lacked imagination. Constance knew only that Cyril had mentioned the cake once or twice. Now by the hazard of destiny that cake found much favour, helped into popularity as it was by the blundering officious relative who, not dreaming what volcano she was treading on, urged its merits with simpering enthusiasm. One boy took two slices, a slice in each hand; he happened to be the visitor of whom the cake distributor was a relative, and she protested; she expressed the shock she suffered. Whereupon both Constance and Samuel sprang forward and swore with angelic smiles that nothing could be more perfect than the propriety of that dear little fellow taking two slices of that cake. It was this hullaballoo that drew Cyril's attention to the evanescence of the cake of cakes. His face at once changed from calm pride to a dreadful anxiety. His eyes bulged out. His tiny mouth grew and grew, like a mouth in a nightmare. He was no longer human; he was a cake-eating tiger being balked of his prey. Nobody noticed him. The officious fool of a woman persuaded Jennie to take the last slice of the cake, which was quite a thin slice.

Then everyone simultaneously noticed Cyril, for he gave a yell. It was not the cry of a despairing soul who sees his beautiful irridescent dream shattered at his feet; it was the cry of the strong, masterful spirit, furious. He turned upon Jennie, sobbing, and snatched at her cake. Unaccustomed to such behaviour from hosts, and being besides a haughty put-you-in-your-place beauty of the future, Jennie defended her cake. After all, it was not she who had taken two slices at once. Cyril hit her in the eye, and then crammed most of the slice of cake into his enormous mouth. He could not swallow it, nor even masticate it, for his throat was rigid and tight. So the cake projected from his red lips, and big tears watered it. The most awful mess you can conceive! Jennie wept loudly, and one or two others joined her in sympathy, but the rest went on eating tranquilly, unmoved by the horror which transfixed their elders.

A host to snatch food from a guest! A host to strike a guest! A gentleman to strike a lady!

Constance whipped up Cyril from his chair and flew with him to his own room (once Samuel's), where she smacked him on the arm and told him he was a very, very naughty boy and that she didn't know what his father would say. She took the food out of his disgusting mouth—or as much of it as she could get at—and then she left him, on the bed. Miss Jennie was still in tears when, blushing scarlet, and trying to smile, Constance returned to the drawing-room. Jennie would not be appeased. Happily Jennie's mother (being about to present Jennie with a little brother—she hoped) was not present. Miss Insull had promised to see Jennie home, and it was decided that she should go. Mr Critchlow, in high sardonic spirits, said that he would go too; the three departed together, heavily charged with Constance's love and apologies. Then all pretended, and said loudly, that what had happened was naught, that such things were always happening at children's parties. And visitors' relatives asseverated that Cyril was a perfect darling and that really Mrs Povey must not . . .

But the attempt to keep up appearance was a failure.

The Methuselah of visitors, a gaping girl of nearly eight years, walked across the room to where Constance

was standing, and said in a loud, confidential, fatuous voice:

"Cyril *has* been a rude boy, hasn't he, Mrs Povey?"

The clumsiness of children is sometimes tragic.

Later, there was a trickling stream of fluffy bundles down the crooked stairs and through the parlour and so out into King Street. And Constance received many compliments and sundry appeals that darling Cyril should be forgiven.

"I thought you said that boy was in his bedroom," said Samuel to Constance, coming into the parlour when the last guest had gone. Each avoided the other's eyes.

"Yes, isn't he?"

"No."

"The little jockey!" ("Jockey," an essay in the playful, towards making light of the jockey's sin!) "I expect he's been in search of Amy."

She went to the top of the kitchen stairs and called out: "Amy, is Master Cyril down there?"

"Master Cyril? No, mum. But he was in the parlour a bit ago, after the first and second lot had gone. I told him to go upstairs and be a good boy."

Not for a few moments did the suspicion enter the minds of Samuel and Constance that Cyril might be missing, that the house might not contain Cyril. But having once entered, the suspicion became a certainty. Amy, cross-examined, burst into sudden tears, admitting that the side-door might have been open when, having sped "the second lot," she criminally left Cyril alone in the parlour in order to descend for an instant to her kitchen. Dusk was gathering. Amy saw the defenceless innocent wandering about all night in the deserted streets of a great city. A similar vision with precise details of canals, tramcarwheels, and cellar-flaps, disturbed Constance. Samuel said that anyhow he could not have got far, that someone was bound to remark and recognize him, and restore him. "Yes, of course," thought sensible Constance. "But supposing—"

They all three searched the entire house again. Then, in the drawing-room (which was in a sad condition of anti-climax) Amy exclaimed:

"Eh, master! There's town-crier crossing the Square. Hadn't ye better have him cried?"

"Run out and stop him," Constance commanded.

And Amy flew.

Samuel and the aged town-crier parleyed at the side-door, the women in the background.

"I canna' cry him without my bell," drawled the crier, stroking his shabby uniform. "My Bell's at wum [home]. I mun go and fetch my bell. Yo' write it down on a bit o' paper for me so as I can read it, and I'll foot off for my bell. Folk wouldna' listen to me if I hadna' gotten my bell."

Thus was Cyril cried.

"Amy," said Constance, when she and the girl were alone, "there's no use in you standing blubbering there. Get to work and clear up that drawing-room, do! The child is sure to be found soon. Your master's gone out, too."

Brave words! Constance aided in the drawing-room and kitchen. Theirs was the woman's lot in a great crisis. Plates have always to be washed.

Very shortly afterwards, Samuel Povey came into the kitchen by the underground passage which led past the two cellars to the yard and to Brougham Street. He was carrying in his arms an obscene black mass. This mass was Cyril, once white.

Constance screamed. She was at liberty to give way to her feelings, because Amy happened to be upstairs.

"Stand away!" cried Mr Povey. "He isn't fit to touch."

And Mr Povey made as if to pass directly onwards, ignoring the mother.

"Wherever did you find him?"

"I found him in the far cellar," said Mr Povey, compelled to stop, after all. "He was down there with me yesterday, and it just occurred to me that he might have gone there again."

"What! All in the dark?"

"He'd lighted a candle, if you please! I'd left a candlestick and a box of matches handy because I hadn't finished that shelving."

"Well!" Constance murmured. "I can't think how ever he dared go there all alone!"

"Can't you?" said Mr Povey, cynically. "I can. He simply did it to frighten us."

"Oh, Cyril!" Constance admonished the child. "Cyril!"

The child showed no emotion. His face was an enigma. It might have hidden sullenness or mere callous indifference, or a perfect unconsciousness of sin.

"Give him to me," said Constance.

"I'll look after him this evening," said Samuel, grimly.

"But you can't wash him," said Constance, her relief yielding to apprehension.

"Why not?" demanded Mr Povey. And he moved off.

"But Sam—"

"I'll look after him, I tell you!" Mr Povey repeated, threateningly.

"But what are you going to do?" Constance asked with fear.

“Well,” said Mr Povey, “has this sort of thing got to be dealt with, or hasn’t it?” He departed upstairs.

Constance overtook him at the door of Cyril’s bedroom.

Mr Povey did not wait for her to speak. His eyes were blazing.

“See here!” he admonished her cruelly. “You get away downstairs, mother!”

And he disappeared into the bedroom with his vile and helpless victim.

A moment later he popped his head out of the door. Constance was disobeying him. He stepped into the passage and shut the door so that Cyril should not hear.

“Now please do as I tell you,” he hissed at his wife. “Don’t let’s have a scene, please.”

She descended, slowly, weeping. And Mr Povey retired again to the place of execution.

Amy nearly fell on the top of Constance with a final tray of things from the drawing-room. And Constance had to tell the girl that Cyril was found. Somehow she could not resist the instinct to tell her also that the master had the affair in hand. Amy then wept.

After about an hour Mr Povey at last reappeared. Constance was trying to count silver teaspoons in the parlour.

“He’s in bed now,” said Mr Povey, with a magnificent attempt to be nonchalant. “You mustn’t go near him.”

“But have you washed him?” Constance whimpered.

“I’ve washed him,” replied the astonishing Mr Povey.

“What have you done to him?”

“I’ve punished him, of course,” said Mr Povey, like a god who is above human weaknesses. “What did you expect me to do? *Someone* had to do it.”

Constance wiped her eyes with the edge of the white apron which she was wearing over her new silk dress. She surrendered; she accepted the situation; she made the best of it. And all the evening was spent in dismally and horribly pretending that their hearts were beating as one. Mr Povey’s elaborate, cheeky kindliness was extremely painful.

They went to bed, and in their bedroom Constance, as she stood close to Samuel, suddenly dropped the pretence, and with eyes and voice of anguish said:

“You must let me look at him.”

They faced each other. For a brief instant Cyril did not exist for Constance. Samuel alone obsessed her, and yet Samuel seemed a strange, unknown man. It was in Constance’s life one of those crises when the human soul seems to be on the very brink of mysterious and disconcerting cognitions, and then the wave recedes as inexplicably as it surged up.

“Why, of course!” said Mr Povey, turning away lightly, as though to imply that she was making tragedies out of nothing.

She gave an involuntary gesture of almost childish relief.

Cyril slept calmly. It was a triumph for Mr Povey.

Constance could not sleep. As she lay darkly awake by her husband, her secret being seemed to be a-quiver with emotion. Not exactly sorrow; not exactly joy; an emotion more elemental than these! A sensation of the intensity of her life in that hour; troubling, anxious, yet not sad! She said that Samuel was quite right, quite right. And then she said that the poor little thing wasn’t yet five years old, and that it was monstrous. The two had to be reconciled. And they never could be reconciled. Always she would be between them, to reconcile them, and to be crushed by their impact. Always she would have to bear the burden of both of them. There could be no ease for her, no surcease from a tremendous preoccupation and responsibility. She could not change Samuel; besides, he was right! And though Cyril was not yet five, she felt that she could not change Cyril either. He was just as unchangeable as a growing plant. The thought of her mother and Sophia did not present itself to her; she felt, however, somewhat as Mrs Baines had felt on historic occasions; but, being more softly kind, younger, and less chafed by destiny, she was conscious of no bitterness, conscious rather of a solemn blessedness.

CHAPTER IV

CRIME

“Now, Master Cyril,” Amy protested, “will you leave that fire alone? It’s not you that can mend my fires.”

A boy of nine, great and heavy for his years, with a full face and very short hair, bent over the smoking grate. It was about five minutes to eight on a chilly morning after Easter. Amy, hastily clad in blue, with a rough brown apron, was setting the breakfast table. The boy turned his head, still bending.

“Shut up, Ame,” he replied, smiling. Life being short, he usually called her Ame when they were alone together. “Or I’ll catch you one in the eye with the poker.”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself,” said Amy. “And you know your mother told you to wash your feet this morning, and you haven’t done. Fine clothes is all very well, but—”

“Who says I haven’t washed my feet?” asked Cyril, guiltily.

Amy’s mention of fine clothes referred to the fact that he was that morning wearing his Sunday suit for the first time on a week-day.

“I say you haven’t,” said Amy.

She was more than three times his age still, but they had been treating each other as intellectual equals for years.

“And how do you know?” asked Cyril, tired of the fire.

“I know,” said Amy.

“Well, you just don’t, then!” said Cyril. “And what about *your* feet? I should be sorry to see your feet, Ame.”

Amy was excusably annoyed. She tossed her head. “My feet are as clean as yours any day,” she said. “And I shall tell your mother.”

But he would not leave her feet alone, and there ensued one of those endless monotonous altercations on a single theme which occur so often between intellectual equals when one is a young son of the house and the other an established servant who adores him. Refined minds would have found the talk disgusting, but the sentiment of disgust seemed to be unknown to either of the wranglers. At last, when Amy by superior tactics had cornered him, Cyril said suddenly:

“Oh, go to hell!”

Amy banged down the spoon for the bacon gravy. “Now I shall tell your mother. Mark my words, this time I *shall* tell your mother.”

Cyril felt that in truth he had gone rather far. He was perfectly sure that Amy would not tell his mother. And yet, supposing that by some freak of her nature she did! The consequences would be unutterable; the consequences would more than extinguish his private glory in the use of such a dashing word. So he laughed, a rather silly, giggling laugh, to reassure himself.

“You daren’t,” he said.

“Daren’t I?” she said grimly. “You’ll see. *I* don’t know where you learn! It fair beats me. But it isn’t Amy Bates as is going to be sworn at. As soon as ever your mother comes into this room!”

The door at the foot of the stairs creaked and Constance came into the room. She was wearing a dress of magenta merino, and a gold chain descended from her neck over her rich bosom. She had scarcely aged in five years. It would have been surprising if she had altered much, for the years had passed over her head at an incredible rate. To her it appeared only a few months since Cyril’s first and last party.

“Are you all ready, my pet? Let me look at you.” Constance greeted the boy with her usual bright, soft energy.

Cyril glanced at Amy, who averted her head, putting spoons into three saucers.

“Yes, mother,” he replied in a new voice.

“Did you do what I told you?”

“Yes, mother,” he said simply.

“That’s right.”

Amy made a faint noise with her lips, and departed.

He was saved once more. He said to himself that never again would he permit his soul to be disturbed by any threat of “old Ame’s.”

Constance’s hand descended into her pocket and drew out a hard paper packet, which she clapped on to her son’s head.

“Oh, mother!” He pretended that she had hurt him, and then he opened the packet. It contained Congleton butterscotch, reputed a harmless sweetmeat.

“Good!” he cried, “good! Oh! Thanks, mother.”

“Now don’t begin eating them at once.”

“Just one, mother.”

“No! And how often have I told you to keep your feet off that fender. See how it’s bent. And it’s nobody but you.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s no use being sorry if you persist in doing it.”

“Oh, mother, I had such a funny dream!”

They chatted until Amy came up the stairs with tea and bacon. The fire had developed from black to clear

red.

"Run and tell father that breakfast is ready."

After a little delay a spectacled man of fifty, short and stoutish, with grey hair and a small beard half grey and half black, entered from the shop. Samuel had certainly very much aged, especially in his gestures, which, however, were still quick. He sat down at once—his wife and son were already seated—and served the bacon with the rapid assurance of one who needs not to inquire about tastes and appetites. Not a word was said, except a brief grace by Samuel. But there was no restraint. Samuel had a mild, benignant air. Constance's eyes were a fountain of cheerfulness. The boy sat between them and ate steadily.

Mysterious creature, this child, mysteriously growing and growing in the house! To his mother he was a delicious joy at all times save when he disobeyed his father. But now for quite a considerable period there had been no serious collision. The boy seemed to be acquiring virtue as well as sense. And really he was charming. So big, truly enormous (everyone remarked on it), and yet graceful, lithe, with a smile that could ravish. And he was distinguished in his bearing. Without depreciating Samuel in her faithful heart, Constance saw plainly the singular differences between Samuel and the boy. Save that he was dark, and that his father's "dangerous look" came into those childish eyes occasionally, Cyril had now scarcely any obvious resemblance to his father. He was a Baines. This naturally deepened Constance's family pride. Yes, he was mysterious to Constance, though probably not more so than any other boy to any other parent. He was equally mysterious to Samuel, but otherwise Mr Povey had learned to regard him in the light of a parcel which he was always attempting to wrap up in a piece of paper imperceptibly too small. When he successfully covered the parcel at one corner it burst out at another, and this went on for ever, and he could never get the string on. Nevertheless, Mr Povey had unabated confidence in his skill as a parcel-wrapper. The boy was strangely subtle at times, but then at times he was astoundingly ingenuous, and then his dodges would not deceive the dullest. Mr Povey knew himself more than a match for his son. He was proud of him because he regarded him as not an ordinary boy; he took it as a matter of course that his boy should not be an ordinary boy. He never, or very rarely, praised Cyril. Cyril thought of his father as a man who, in response to any request, always began by answering with a thoughtful, serious "No, I'm afraid not."

"So you haven't lost your appetite!" his mother commented.

Cyril grinned. "Did you expect me to, mother?"

"Let me see," said Samuel, as if vaguely recalling an unimportant fact. "It's today you begin to go to school, isn't it?"

"I wish father wouldn't be such a chump!" Cyril reflected. And, considering that this commencement of school (real school, not a girls' school, as once) had been the chief topic in the house for days, weeks; considering that it now occupied and filled all hearts, Cyril's reflection was excusable.

"Now, there's one thing you must always remember, my boy," said Mr Povey. "Promptness. Never be late either in going to school or in coming home. And in order that you may have no excuse"—Mr Povey pressed on the word "excuse," as though condemning Cyril in advance—"here's something for you!" He said the last words quickly, with a sort of modest shame.

It was a silver watch and chain.

Cyril was staggered. So also was Constance, for Mr Povey could keep his own counsel. At long intervals he would prove, thus, that he was a mighty soul, capable of sublime deeds. The watch was the unique flowering of Mr Povey's profound but harsh affection. It lay on the table like a miracle. This day was a great day, a supremely exciting day in Cyril's history, and not less so in the history of his parents.

The watch killed its owner's appetite dead.

Routine was ignored that morning. Father did not go back into the shop. At length the moment came when father put on his hat and overcoat to take Cyril, and Cyril's watch and satchel, to the Endowed School, which had quarters in the Wedgwood Institution close by. A solemn departure, and Cyril could not pretend by his demeanour that it was not! Constance desired to kiss him, but refrained. He would not have liked it. She watched them from the window. Cyril was nearly as tall as his father; that is to say, not nearly as tall, but creeping up his father's shoulder. She felt that the eyes of the town must be on the pair. She was very happy, and nervous.

At dinner-time a triumph seemed probable, and at tea-time, when Cyril came home under a mortar-board hat and with a satchel full of new books and a head full of new ideas, the triumph was actually and definitely achieved. He had been put into the third form, and he announced that he should soon be at the top of it. He was enchanted with the life of school; he liked the other boys, and it appeared that the other boys liked him. The fact was that, with a new silver watch and a packet of sweets, he had begun his new career in the most advantageous circumstances. Moreover, he possessed qualities which ensured success at school. He was big, and easy, with a captivating smile and a marked aptitude to learn those things which boys insist on teaching to their new comrades. He had muscle, a brave demeanour, and no conceit.

During tea the parlour began to accustom itself to a new vocabulary, containing such words as "fellows," "kept in," "lines," "rot," "recess," "jolly." To some of these words the parents, especially Mr Povey, had an instinct to object, but they could not object, somehow they did not seem to get an opportunity to object; they were carried away on the torrent, and after all, their excitement and pleasure in the exceeding romantic

novelty of existence were just as intense and nearly as ingenuous as their son's.

He demonstrated that unless he was allowed to stay up later than aforetime he would not be able to do his home-work, and hence would not keep that place in the school to which his talents entitled him. Mr Povey suggested, but only with half a heart, that he should get up earlier in the morning. The proposal fell flat. Everybody knew and admitted that nothing save the scorpions of absolute necessity, or a tremendous occasion, such as that particular morning's, would drive Cyril from his bed until the smell of bacon rose to him from the kitchen. The parlour table was consecrated to his lessons. It became generally known that "Cyril was doing his lessons." His father scanned the new text-books while Cyril condescendingly explained to him that all others were superseded and worthless. His father contrived to maintain an air of preserving his mental equilibrium, but not his mother; she gave it up, she who till that day had under his father's direction taught him nearly all that he knew, and Cyril passed above her into regions of knowledge where she made no pretence of being able to follow him.

When the lessons were done, and Cyril had wiped his fingers on bits of blotting paper, and his father had expressed qualified approval and had gone into the shop, Cyril said to his mother, with that delicious hesitation which overtook him sometimes:

"Mother."

"Well, my pet."

"I want you to do something for me."

"Well, what is it?"

"No, you must promise."

"I'll do it if I can."

"But you *can*. It isn't doing. It's *not* doing."

"Come, Cyril, out with it."

"I don't want you to come in and look at me after I'm asleep any more."

"But, you silly boy, what difference can it make to you if you're asleep?"

"I don't want you to. It's like as if I was a baby. You'll *have* to stop doing it some day, and so you may as well stop now."

It was thus he meant to turn his back on his youth.

She smiled. She was incomprehensibly happy. She continued to smile.

"Now you'll promise, won't you, mother?"

She rapped him on the head with her thimble, lovingly. He took the gesture for consent.

"You are a baby," she murmured.

"Now I shall *trust* you," he said, ignoring this. "Say 'honour bright.'"

"Honour bright."

With what a long caress her eyes followed him, as he went up to bed on his great sturdy legs! She was thankful that school had not contaminated her adorable innocent. If she could have been Ame for twenty-four hours, she perhaps would not have hesitated to put butter into his mouth lest it should melt.

Mr Povey and Constance talked late and low that night. They could neither of them sleep; they had little desire to sleep. Constance's face said to her husband: "I've always stuck up for that boy, in spite of your severities, and you see how right I was!" And Mr Povey's face said: "You see now the brilliant success of my system. You see how my educational theories have justified themselves. Never been to a school before, except that wretched little dame's school, and he goes practically straight to the top of the third form—at nine years of age!" They discussed his future. There could be no sign of lunacy in discussing his future up to a certain point, but each felt that to discuss the ultimate career of a child nine years old would not be the act of a sensible parent; only foolish parents would be so fond. Yet each was dying to discuss his ultimate career. Constance yielded first to the temptation, as became her. Mr Povey scoffed, and then, to humour Constance, yielded also. The matter was soon fairly on the carpet. Constance was relieved to find that Mr Povey had no thought whatever of putting Cyril in the shop. No; Mr Povey did not desire to chop wood with a razor. Their son must and would ascend. Doctor! Solicitor! Barrister! Not barrister—barrister was fantastic. When they had argued for about half an hour Mr Povey intimated suddenly that the conversation was unworthy of their practical common sense, and went to sleep.

II

Nobody really thought that this almost ideal condition of things would persist: an enterprise commenced in such glory must surely traverse periods of difficulty and even of temporary disaster. But no! Cyril seemed to be made specially for school. Before Mr Povey and Constance had quite accustomed themselves to being the parents of "a great lad," before Cyril had broken the glass of his miraculous watch more than once, the summer term had come to an end and there arrived the excitations of the prize-giving, as it was called; for at that epoch the smaller schools had not found the effrontery to dub the breaking-up ceremony a "speech-day." This prize-giving furnished a particular joy to Mr and Mrs Povey. Although the prizes were notoriously few in number—party to add to their significance, and partly to diminish their cost (the foundation was poor)—Cyril

won a prize, a box of geometrical instruments of precision; also he reached the top of his form, and was marked for promotion to the formidable Fourth. Samuel and Constance were bidden to the large hall of the Wedgwood Institution of a summer afternoon, and they saw the whole Board of Governors raised on a rostrum, and in the middle, in front of what he referred to, in his aristocratic London accent, as "a beggarly array of rewards" the aged and celebrated Sir Thomas Wilbraham Wilbraham, ex-M.P., last respectable member of his ancient line. And Sir Thomas gave the box of instruments to Cyril, and shook hands with him. And everybody was very well dressed. Samuel, who had never attended anything but a National School, recalled the simple rigours of his own boyhood, and swelled. For certainly, of all the parents present he was among the richest. When, in the informal promiscuities which followed the prize distribution, Cyril joined his father and mother, sheepishly they duly did their best to make light of his achievements, and failed. The walls of the hall were covered with specimens of the pupils' skill, and the headmaster was observed to direct the attention of the mighty to a map done by Cyril. Of course it was a map of Ireland, Ireland being the map chosen by every map-drawing schoolboy who is free to choose. For a third-form boy it was considered a masterpiece. In the shading of the mountains Cyril was already a prodigy. Never, it was said, had the Macgillycuddy Reeks been indicated by a member of that school with a more amazing subtle refinement than by the young Povey. From a proper pride in themselves, from a proper fear lest they should be secretly accused of ostentation by other parents, Samuel and Constance did not go near that map. For the rest, they had lived with it for weeks, and Samuel (who, after all, was determined not to be dirt under his son's feet) had scratched a blot from it With a completeness that defied inquisitive examination.

The fame of this map, added to the box of compasses and Cyril's own desire, pointed to an artistic career. Cyril had always drawn and daubed, and the drawing-master of the Endowed School, who was also headmaster of the Art School, had suggested that the youth should attend the Art School one night a week. Samuel, however, would not listen to the idea; Cyril was too young. It is true that Cyril was too young, but Samuel's real objection was to Cyril's going out alone in the evening. On that he was adamant.

The Governors had recently made the discovery that a sports department was necessary to a good school, and had rented a field for cricket, football, and rounders up at Bleakridge, an innovation which demonstrated that the town was moving with the rapid times. In June this field was open after school hours till eight P.M. as well as on Saturdays. The Squire learnt that Cyril had a talent for cricket, and Cyril wished to practise in the evenings, and was quite ready to bind himself with Bible oaths to rise at no matter what hour in the morning for the purpose of home lessons. He scarcely expected his father to say "Yes," as his father never did say "Yes," but he was obliged to ask. Samuel non-plussed him by replying that on fine evenings, when he could spare time from the shop, he would go up to Bleakridge with his son. Cyril did not like this in the least. Still, it might be tried. One evening they went, actually, in the new steam-car which had superseded the old horse-cars, and which travelled all the way to Longshaw, a place that Cyril had only heard of. Samuel talked of the games played in the Five Towns in his day, of the Titanic sport of prison-bars, when the team of one "bank" went forth to the challenge of another "bank," preceded by a drum-and-fife band, and when, in the heat of the chase, a man might jump into the canal to escape his pursuer; Samuel had never played at cricket.

Samuel, with a very young grandson of Fan (deceased), sat in dignity on the grass and watched his cricketer for an hour and a half (while Constance kept an eye on the shop and superintended its closing). Samuel then conducted Cyril home again. Two days later the father of his own accord offered to repeat the experience. Cyril refused. Disagreeable insinuations that he was a baby in arms had been made at school in the meantime.

Nevertheless, in other directions Cyril sometimes surprisingly conquered. For instance, he came home one day with the information that a dog that was not a bull-terrier was not worth calling a dog. Fan's grandson had been carried off in earliest prime by a chicken-bone that had pierced his vitals, and Cyril did indeed persuade his father to buy a bull-terrier. The animal was a superlative of forbidding ugliness, but father and son vied with each other in stern critical praise of his surpassing beauty, and Constance, from good nature, joined in the pretence. He was called Lion, and the shop, after one or two untoward episodes, was absolutely closed to him.

But the most striking of Cyril's successes had to do with the question of the annual holiday. He spoke of the sea soon after becoming a schoolboy. It appeared that his complete ignorance of the sea prejudicially affected him at school. Further, he had always loved the sea; he had drawn hundreds of three-masted ships with studding-sails set, and knew the difference between a brig and a brigantine. When he first said: "I say, mother, why can't we go to Llandudno instead of Buxton this year?" his mother thought he was out of his senses. For the idea of going to any place other than Buxton was inconceivable! Had they not always been to Buxton? What would their landlady say? How could they ever look her in the face again? Besides . . . well . . . ! They went to Llandudno, rather scared, and hardly knowing how the change had come about. But they went. And it was the force of Cyril's will, Cyril the theoretic cipher, that took them.

III

The removal of the Endowed School to more commodious premises in the shape of Shawport Hall, an ancient mansion with fifty rooms and five acres of land round about it, was not a change that quite pleased

Samuel or Constance. They admitted the hygienic advantages, but Shawport Hall was three-quarters of a mile distant from St Luke's Square—in the hollow that separates Bursley from its suburb of Hillport; whereas the Wedgwood Institution was scarcely a minute away. It was as if Cyril, when he set off to Shawport Hall of a morning, passed out of their sphere of influence. He was leagues off, doing they knew not what. Further, his dinner-hour was cut short by the extra time needed for the journey to and fro, and he arrived late for tea; it may be said that he often arrived very late for tea; the whole machinery of the meal was disturbed. These matters seemed to Samuel and Constance to be of tremendous import, seemed to threaten the very foundations of existence. Then they grew accustomed to the new order, and wondered sometimes, when they passed the Wedgwood Institution and the insalubrious Cock Yard—once sole playground of the boys—that the school could ever have "managed" in the narrow quarters once allotted to it.

Cyril, though constantly successful at school, a rising man, an infallible bringer-home of excellent reports, and a regular taker of prizes, became gradually less satisfactory in the house. He was "kept in" occasionally, and although his father pretended to hold that to be kept in was to slur the honour of a spotless family, Cyril continued to be kept in; a hardened sinner, lost to shame. But this was not the worst. The worst undoubtedly was that Cyril was "getting rough." No definite accusation could be laid against him; the offence was general, vague, everlasting; it was in all he did and said, in every gesture and movement. He shouted, whistled, sang, stamped, stumbled, lunged. He omitted such empty rites as saying "Yes" or "Please," and wiping his nose. He replied gruffly and nonchalantly to polite questions, or he didn't reply until the questions were repeated, and even then with a "lost" air that was not genuine. His shoe-laces were a sad sight, and his finger-nails no sight at all for a decent woman; his hair was as rough as his conduct; hardly at the pistol's point could he be forced to put oil on it. In brief, he was no longer the nice boy that he used to be. He had unmistakably deteriorated. Grievous! But what can you expect when *your* boy is obliged, month after month and year after year, to associate with other boys? After all, he was a *good* boy, said Constance, often to herself and now and then to Samuel. For Constance, his charm was eternally renewed. His smile, his frequent ingenuousness, his funny self-conscious gesture when he wanted to "get round" her—these characteristics remained; and his pure heart remained; she could read that in his eyes. Samuel was inimical to his tastes for sports and his triumphs therein. But Constance had pride in all that. She liked to feel him and to gaze at him, and to smell that faint, uncleanly odour of sweat that hung in his clothes.

In this condition he reached the advanced age of thirteen. And his parents, who despite their notion of themselves as wide-awake parents were a simple pair, never suspected that his heart, conceived to be still pure, had become a crawling, horrible mass of corruption.

One day the headmaster called at the shop. Now, to see a headmaster walking about the town during school-hours is a startling spectacle, and is apt to give you the same uncanny sensation as when, alone in a room, you think you see something move which ought not to move. Mr Povey was startled. Mr Povey had a thumping within his breast as he rubbed his hands and drew the headmaster to the private corner where his desk was. "What can I do for you today?" he almost said to the headmaster. But he did not say it. The boot was emphatically not on that leg. The headmaster talked to Mr Povey in tones carefully low, for about a quarter of an hour, and then he closed the interview. Mr Povey escorted him across the shop and the headmaster said with ordinary loudness: "Of course it's nothing. But my experience is that it's just as well to be on the safe side, and I thought I'd tell you. Forewarned is forearmed. I have other parents to see." They shook hands at the door. Then Mr Povey stepped out on the pavement and, in front of the whole Square, detained an unwilling headmaster for quite another minute.

His face was deeply flushed as he returned into the shop. The assistants bent closer over their work. He did not instantly rush into the parlour and communicate with Constance. He had dropped into a way of conducting many operations by his own unaided brain. His confidence in his skill had increased with years. Further, at the back of his mind, there had established itself a vision of Mr Povey as the seat of government and of Constance and Cyril as a sort of permanent opposition. He would not have admitted that he saw such a vision, for he was utterly loyal to his wife; but it was there. This unconfessed vision was one of several causes which had contributed to intensify his inherent tendency towards Machiavellianism and secretiveness. He said nothing to Constance, nothing to Cyril; but, happening to encounter Amy in the showroom, he was inspired to interrogate her sharply. The result was that they descended to the cellar together, Amy weeping. Amy was commanded to hold her tongue. And as she went in mortal fear of Mr Povey she did hold her tongue.

Nothing occurred for several days. And then one morning—it was Constance's birthday: children are nearly always horribly unlucky in their choice of days for sin—Mr Povey, having executed mysterious movements in the shop after Cyril's departure to school, jammed his hat on his head and ran forth in pursuit of Cyril, whom he intercepted with two other boys, at the corner of Oldcastle Street and Acre Passage.

Cyril stood as if turned into salt. "Come back home!" said Mr Povey, grimly; and for the sake of the other boys: "Please."

"But I shall be late for school, father," Cyril weakly urged.

"Never mind."

They passed through the shop together, causing a terrific concealed emotion, and then they did violence to Constance by appearing in the parlour. Constance was engaged in cutting straws and ribbons to make a straw-

frame for a water-colour drawing of a moss-rose which her pure-hearted son had given her as a birthday present.

"Why—what—?" she exclaimed. She said no more at the moment because she was sure, from the faces of her men, that the time was big with fearful events.

"Take your satchel off," Mr Povey ordered coldly. "And your mortar-board," he added with a peculiar intonation, as if glad thus to prove that Cyril was one of those rude boys who have to be told to take their hats off in a room.

"Whatever's amiss?" Constance murmured under her breath, as Cyril obeyed the command. "Whatever's amiss?"

Mr Povey made no immediate answer. He was in charge of these proceedings, and was very anxious to conduct them with dignity and with complete effectiveness. Little fat man over fifty, with a wizened face, grey-haired and grey-bearded, he was as nervous as a youth. His heart beat furiously. And Constance, the portly matron who would never see forty again, was just as nervous as a girl. Cyril had gone very white. All three felt physically sick.

"What money have you got in your pockets?" Mr Povey demanded, as a commencement.

Cyril, who had no opportunity to prepare his case, offered no reply.

"You heard what I said," Mr Povey thundered.

"I've got three-halfpence," Cyril murmured glumly, looking down at the floor. His lower lip seemed to hang precariously away from his gums.

"Where did you get that from?"

"It's part of what mother gave me," said the boy.

"I did give him a threepenny bit last week," Constance put in guiltily. "It was a long time since he had had any money."

"If you gave it him, that's enough," said Mr Povey quickly, and to the boy: "That's all you've got?"

"Yes, father," said the boy.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, father."

Cyril was playing a hazardous game for the highest stakes, and under grave disadvantages; and he acted for the best. He guarded his own interests as well as he could.

Mr Povey found himself obliged to take a serious risk. "Empty your pockets, then."

Cyril, perceiving that he had lost that particular game, emptied his pockets.

"Cyril," said Constance, "how often have I told you to change your handkerchiefs oftener! Just look at this!"

Astonishing creature! She was in the seventh hell of sick apprehension, and yet she said that!

After the handkerchief emerged the common schoolboy stock of articles useful and magic, and then, last, a silver florin!

Mr Povey felt relief.

"Oh, Cyril!" whimpered Constance.

"Give it your mother," said Mr Povey.

The boy stepped forward awkwardly, and Constance, weeping, took the coin.

"Please look at it, mother," said Mr Povey. "And tell me if there's a cross marked on it."

Constance's tears blurred the coin. She had to wipe her eyes.

"Yes," she whispered faintly. "There's something on it."

"I thought so," said Mr Povey. "Where did you steal it from?" he demanded.

"Out of the till," answered Cyril.

"Have you ever stolen anything out of the till before?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what."

"Yes, father."

"Take your hands out of your pockets and stand up straight, if you can. How often?"

"I—I don't know, father."

"I blame myself," said Mr Povey, frankly. "I blame myself. The till ought always to be locked. All tills ought always to be locked. But we felt we could trust the assistants. If anybody had told me that I ought not to trust you, if anybody had told me that my own son would be the thief, I should have—well, I don't know what I should have said!"

Mr Povey was quite justified in blaming himself. The fact was that the functioning of that till was a patriarchal survival, which he ought to have revolutionized, but which it had never occurred to him to revolutionize, so accustomed to it was he. In the time of John Baines, the till, with its three bowls, two for silver and one for copper (gold had never been put into it), was invariably unlocked. The person in charge of the shop took change from it for the assistants, or temporarily authorized an assistant to do so. Gold was kept in a small linen bag in a locked drawer of the desk. The contents of the till were never checked by any system of book-keeping, as there was no system of book-keeping; when all transactions, whether in payment or receipt, are in cash—the Baineses never owed a penny save the quarterly wholesale accounts, which were

discharged instantly to the travellers—a system of book-keeping is not indispensable. The till was situate immediately at the entrance to the shop from the house; it was in the darkest part of the shop, and the unfortunate Cyril had to pass it every day on his way to school. The thing was a perfect device for the manufacture of young criminals.

"And how have you been spending this money?" Mr Povey inquired.

Cyril's hands slipped into his pockets again. Then, noticing the lapse, he dragged them out.

"Sweets," said he.

"Anything else?"

"Sweets and things."

"Oh!" said Mr Povey. "Well, now you can go down into the cinder-cellar and bring up here all the things there are in that little box in the corner. Off you go!"

And off went Cyril. He had to swagger through the kitchen.

"What did I tell you, Master Cyril?" Amy unwisely asked of him. "You've copped it finely this time."

"Copped" was a word which she had learned from Cyril.

"Go on, you old bitch!" Cyril growled.

As he returned from the cellar, Amy said angrily:

"I told you I should tell your father the next time you called me that, and I shall. You mark my words."

"Cant! cant!" he retorted. "Do you think I don't know who's been canting? Cant! cant!"

Upstairs in the parlour Samuel was explaining the matter to his wife. There had been a perfect epidemic of smoking in the school. The headmaster had discovered it and, he hoped, stamped it out. What had disturbed the headmaster far more than the smoking was the fact that a few boys had been found to possess somewhat costly pipes, cigar-holders, or cigarette-holders. The headmaster, wily, had not confiscated these articles; he had merely informed the parents concerned. In his opinion the articles came from one single source, a generous thief; he left the parents to ascertain which of them had brought a thief into the world.

Further information Mr Povey had culled from Amy, and there could remain no doubt that Cyril had been providing his chums with the utensils of smoking, the till supplying the means. He had told Amy that the things which he secreted in the cellar had been presented to him by blood-brothers. But Mr Povey did not believe that. Anyhow, he had marked every silver coin in the till for three nights, and had watched the till in the mornings from behind the merino-pile; and the florin on the parlour table spoke of his success as a detective.

Constance felt guilty on behalf of Cyril. As Mr Povey outlined his case she could not free herself from an entirely irrational sensation of sin; at any rate of special responsibility. Cyril seemed to be her boy and not Samuel's boy at all. She avoided her husband's glance. This was very odd.

Then Cyril returned, and his parents composed their faces and he deposited, next to the florin, a sham meerschaum pipe in a case, a tobacco-pouch, a cigar of which one end had been charred but the other not cut, and a half-empty packet of cigarettes without a label.

Nothing could be hid from Mr Povey. The details were distressing.

"So Cyril is a liar and a thief, to say nothing of this smoking!" Mr Povey concluded.

He spoke as if Cyril had invented strange and monstrous sins. But deep down in his heart a little voice was telling him, as regards the smoking, that *he* had set the example. Mr Baines had never smoked. Mr Critchlow never smoked. Only men like Daniel smoked.

Thus far Mr Povey had conducted the proceedings to his own satisfaction. He had proved the crime. He had made Cyril confess. The whole affair lay revealed. Well—what next? Cyril ought to have dissolved in repentance; something dramatic ought to have occurred. But Cyril simply stood with hanging, sulky head, and gave no sign of proper feeling.

Mr Povey considered that, until something did happen, he must improve the occasion.

"Here we have trade getting worse every day," said he (it was true), "and you are robbing your parents to make a beast of yourself, and corrupting your companions! I wonder your mother never smelt you!"

"I never dreamt of such a thing!" said Constance, grievously.

Besides, a young man clever enough to rob a till is usually clever enough to find out that the secret of safety in smoking is to use cachous and not to keep the stuff in your pockets a minute longer than you can help.

"There's no knowing how much money you have stolen," said Mr Povey. "A thief!"

If Cyril had stolen cakes, jam, string, cigars, Mr Povey would never have said "thief" as he did say it. But money! Money was different. And a till was not a cupboard or a larder. A till was a till. Cyril had struck at the very basis of society.

"And on your mother's birthday!" Mr Povey said further.

"There's one thing I can do!" he said. "I can burn all this. Built on lies! How dared you?"

And he pitched into the fire—not the apparatus of crime, but the water-colour drawing of a moss-rose and the straws and the blue ribbons for bows at the corners.

"How dared you?" he repeated.

"You never gave me any money," Cyril muttered.

He thought the marking of coins a mean trick, and the dragging-in

of bad trade and his mother's birthday roused a familiar devil that usually slept quietly in his breast.

"What's that you say?" Mr Povey almost shouted.

"You never gave me any money," the devil repeated in a louder tone than Cyril had employed.

(It was true. But Cyril "had only to ask," and he would have received all that was good for him.)

Mr Povey sprang up. Mr Povey also had a devil. The two devils gazed at each other for an instant; and then, noticing that Cyril's head was above Mr Povey's, the elder devil controlled itself. Mr Povey had suddenly had as much drama as he wanted.

"Get away to bed!" said he with dignity.

Cyril went, defiantly.

"He's to have nothing but bread and water, mother," Mr Povey finished. He was, on the whole, pleased with himself.

Later in the day Constance reported, tearfully, that she had been up to Cyril and that Cyril had wept. Which was to Cyril's credit. But all felt that life could never be the same again. During the remainder of existence this unspeakable horror would lift its obscene form between them. Constance had never been so unhappy. Occasionally, when by herself she would rebel for a brief moment, as one rebels in secret against a mummery which one is obliged to treat seriously. "After all," she would whisper, "suppose he *has* taken a few shillings out of the till! What then? What does it matter?" But these moods of moral insurrection against society and Mr Povey were very transitory. They were come and gone in a flash.

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER CRIME

I

One night—it was late in the afternoon of the same year, about six months after the tragedy of the florin—Samuel Povey was wakened up by a hand on his shoulder and a voice that whispered: “Father!”

The thief and the liar was standing in his night-shirt by the bed. Samuel’s sleepy eyes could just descry him in the thick gloom.

“What—what?” questioned the father, gradually coming to consciousness. “What are you doing there?”

“I didn’t want to wake mother up,” the boy whispered. “There’s someone been throwing dirt or something at our windows, and has been for a long time.”

“Eh, what?”

Samuel stared at the dim form of the thief and liar. The boy was tall, not in the least like a little boy; and yet, then, he seemed to his father as quite a little boy, a little “thing” in a night-shirt, with childish gestures and childish inflections, and a childish, delicious, quaint anxiety not to disturb his mother, who had lately been deprived of sleep owing to an illness of Amy’s which had demanded nursing. His father had not so perceived him for years. In that instant the conviction that Cyril was permanently unfit for human society finally expired in the father’s mind. Time had already weakened it very considerably. The decision that, be Cyril what he might, the summer holiday must be taken as usual, had dealt it a fearful blow. And yet, though Samuel and Constance had grown so accustomed to the companionship of a criminal that they frequently lost memory of his guilt for long periods, nevertheless the convention of his leprosy had more or less persisted with Samuel until that moment: when it vanished with strange suddenness, to Samuel’s conscious relief.

There was a rain of pellets on the window.

“Hear that?” demanded Cyril, whispering dramatically. “And it’s been like that on my window too.”

Samuel arose. “Go back to your room!” he ordered in the same dramatic whisper; but not as father to son—rather as conspirator to conspirator.

Constance slept. They could hear her regular breathing.

Barefooted, the elderly gowned figure followed the younger, and one after the other they creaked down the two steps which separated Cyril’s room from his parents’.

“Shut the door quietly!” said Samuel.

Cyril observed.

And then, having lighted Cyril’s gas, Samuel drew the blind, unfastened the catch of the window, and began to open it with many precautions of silence. All the sashes in that house were difficult to manage. Cyril stood close to his father, shivering without knowing that he shivered, astonished only that his father had not told him to get back into bed at once. It was, beyond doubt, the proudest hour of Cyril’s career. In addition to the mysterious circumstances of the night, there was in the situation that thrill which always communicates itself to a father and son when they are afoot together upon an enterprise unsuspected by the woman from whom their lives have no secrets.

Samuel put his head out of the window.

A man was standing there.

“That you, Samuel?” The voice came low.

“Yes,” replied Samuel, cautiously. “It’s not Cousin Daniel, is it?”

“I want ye,” said Daniel Povey curtly.

Samuel paused. “I’ll be down in a minute,” he said.

Cyril at length received the command to get back into bed at once.

“Whatever’s up, father?” he asked joyously.

“I don’t know. I must put some things on and go and see.”

He shut down the window on all the breezes that were pouring into the room.

“Now quick, before I turn the gas out!” he admonished, his hand on the gas-tap.

"You'll tell me in the morning, won't you, father?"

"Yes," said Mr Povey, conquering his habitual impulse to say "No."

He crept back to the large bedroom to grope for clothes.

When, having descended to the parlour and lighted the gas there, he opened the side-door, expecting to let Cousin Daniel in, there was no sign of Cousin Daniel. Presently he saw a figure standing at the corner of the Square. He whistled—Samuel had a singular faculty of whistling, the envy of his son—and Daniel beckoned to him. He nearly extinguished the gas and then ran out, hatless. He was wearing most of his clothes, except his linen collar and neck-tie, and the collar of his coat was turned up.

Daniel advanced before him, without waiting, into the confectioner's shop opposite. Being part of the most modern building in the Square, Daniel's shop was provided with the new roll-down iron shutter, by means of which you closed your establishment with a motion similar to the winding of a large clock, instead of putting up twenty separate shutters one by one as in the sixteenth century. The little portal in the vast sheet of armour was ajar, and Daniel had passed into the gloom beyond. At the same moment a policeman came along on his beat, cutting off Mr Povey from Daniel.

"Good night, officer! Brrr!" said Mr Povey, gathering his dignity about him and holding himself as though it was part of his normal habit to take exercise bareheaded and collarless in St Luke's Square on cold November nights. He behaved so because, if Daniel had desired the services of a policeman, Daniel would of course have spoken to this one.

"Goo' night, sir," said the policeman, after recognizing him.

"What time is it?" asked Samuel, bold.

"A quarter-past one, sir."

The policeman, leaving Samuel at the little open door, went forward across the lamplit Square, and Samuel entered his cousin's shop.

Daniel Povey was standing behind the door, and as Samuel came in he shut the door with a startling sudden movement. Save for the twinkle of gas, the shop was in darkness. It had the empty appearance which a well-managed confectioner's and baker's always has at night. The large brass scales near the flour-bins glinted; and the glass cake-stands, with scarce a tart among them, also caught the faint flare of the gas.

"What's the matter, Daniel? Anything wrong?" Samuel asked, feeling boyish as he usually did in the presence of Daniel.

The well-favoured white-haired man seized him with one hand by the shoulder in a grip that convicted Samuel of frailty.

"Look here, Sam'l," said he in his low, pleasant voice, somewhat altered by excitement. "You know as my wife drinks?"

He stared defiantly at Samuel.

"N—no," said Samuel. "That is—no one's ever *said*—"

This was true. He did not know that Mrs Daniel Povey, at the age of fifty, had definitely taken to drink. There had been rumours that she enjoyed a glass with too much gusto; but "drinks" meant more than that.

"She drinks," Daniel Povey continued. "And has done this last two year!"

"I'm very sorry to hear it," said Samuel, tremendously shocked by this brutal rending of the cloak of decency.

Always, everybody had feigned to Daniel, and Daniel had feigned to everybody, that his wife was as other wives. And now the man himself had torn to pieces in a moment the veil of thirty years' weaving.

"And if that was the worst!" Daniel murmured reflectively, loosening his grip.

Samuel was excessively disturbed. His cousin was hinting at matters which he himself, at any rate, had never hinted at even to Constance, so abhorrent were they; matters unutterable, which hung like clouds in the social atmosphere of the town, and of which at rare intervals one conveyed one's cognizance, not by words, but by something scarce perceptible in a glance, an accent. Not often is a town such as Bursley starred with such a woman as Mrs Daniel Povey.

"But what's wrong?" Samuel asked, trying to be firm.

And, "What *is* wrong?" he asked himself. "what does all this mean, at after one o'clock in the morning?"

"Look here, Sam'l," Daniel recommenced, seizing his shoulder again. "I went to Liverpool corn market today, and missed the last train, so I came by mail from Crewe. And what do I find? I find Dick sitting on the stairs in the dark pretty nigh naked."

"Sitting on the stairs? Dick?"

"Ay! This is what I come home to!"

"But—"

"Hold on! He's been in bed a couple of days with a feverish cold, caught through lying in damp sheets as his mother had forgot to air. She brings him no supper tonight. He calls out. No answer. Then he gets up to go downstairs and see what's happened, and he slips on th' stairs and breaks his knee, or puts it out or summat. Sat there hours, seemingly! Couldn't walk neither up nor down."

"And was your—wife—was Mrs—?"

"Dead drunk in the parlour, Sam'l."

"But the servant?"

"Servant!" Daniel Povey laughed. "We can't keep our servants. They won't stay. *You* know that."

He did. Mrs Daniel Povey's domestic methods and idiosyncracies could at any rate be freely discussed, and they were.

"And what have you done?"

"Done? Why, I picked him up in my arms and carried him upstairs again. And a fine job I had too! Here! Come here!"

Daniel strode impulsively across the shop—the counterflap was up—and opened a door at the back. Samuel followed. Never before had he penetrated so far into his cousin's secrets. On the left, within the doorway, were the stairs, dark; on the right a shut door; and in front an open door giving on to a yard. At the extremity of the yard he discerned a building, vaguely lit, and naked figures strangely moving in it.

"What's that? Who's there?" he asked sharply.

"That's the bakehouse," Daniel replied, as if surprised at such a question. "It's one of their long nights."

Never, during the brief remainder of his life, did Samuel eat a mouthful of common bread without recalling that midnight apparition. He had lived for half a century, and thoughtlessly eaten bread as though loaves grew ready-made on trees.

"Listen!" Daniel commanded him.

He cocked his ear, and caught a feeble, complaining wail from an upper floor.

"That's Dick! That is!" said Daniel Povey.

It sounded more like the distress of a child than of an adventurous young man of twenty-four or so.

"But is he in pain? Haven't you fetched the doctor?"

"Not yet," answered Daniel, with a vacant stare.

Samuel gazed at him closely for a second. And Daniel seemed to him very old and helpless and pathetic, a man unequal to the situation in which he found himself; and yet, despite the dignified snow of his age, wistfully boyish. Samuel thought swiftly: "This has been too much for him. He's almost out of his mind. That's the explanation. Someone's got to take charge, and I must." And all the courageous resolution of his character braced itself to the crisis. Being without a collar, being in slippers, and his suspenders imperfectly fastened anyhow—these things seemed to be a part of the crisis.

"I'll just run upstairs and have a look at him," said Samuel, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Daniel did not reply.

There was a glimmer at the top of the stairs. Samuel mounted, found the gas-jet, and turned it on full. A dingy, dirty, untidy passage was revealed, the very antechamber of discomfort. Guided by the moans, Samuel entered a bedroom, which was in a shameful condition of neglect, and lighted only by a nearly expired candle. Was it possible that a house-mistress could so lose her self-respect? Samuel thought of his own abode, meticulously and impeccably "kept," and a hard bitterness against Mrs Daniel surged up in his soul.

"Is that you, doctor?" said a voice from the bed; the moans ceased.

Samuel raised the candle.

Dick lay there, his face, on which was a beard of several days' growth, distorted by anguish, sweating; his tousled brown hair was limp with sweat.

"Where the hell's the doctor?" the young man demanded brusquely. Evidently he had no curiosity about Samuel's presence; the one thing that struck him was that Samuel was not the doctor.

"He's coming, he's coming," said Samuel, soothingly.

"Well, if he isn't here soon I shall be damn well dead," said Dick, in feeble resentful anger. "I can tell you that."

Samuel deposited the candle and ran downstairs. "I say, Daniel," he said, roused and hot, "this is really ridiculous. Why on earth didn't you fetch the doctor while you were waiting for me? Where's the missis?"

Daniel Povey was slowly emptying grains of Indian corn out of his jacket-pocket into one of the big receptacles behind the counter on the baker's side of the shop. He had provisioned himself with Indian corn as ammunition for Samuel's bedroom window; he was now returning the surplus.

"Are you going for Harrop?" he questioned hesitatingly.

"Why, of course!" Samuel exclaimed. "Where's the missis?"

"Happen you'd better go and have a look at her," said Daniel Povey. "She's in th' parlour."

He preceded Samuel to the shut door on the right. When he opened it the parlour appeared in full illumination.

"Here! Go in!" said Daniel.

Samuel went in, afraid. In a room as dishevelled and filthy as the bedroom, Mrs Daniel Povey lay stretched awkwardly on a worn horse-hair sofa, her head thrown back, her face discoloured, her eyes bulging, her mouth wet and yawning: a sight horribly offensive. Samuel was frightened; he was struck with fear and with disgust. The singing gas beat down ruthlessly on that dreadful figure. A wife and mother! The lady of a house! The centre of order! The fount of healing! The balm for worry, and the refuge of distress! She was vile. Her scanty yellow-grey hair was dirty, her hollowed neck all grime, her hands abominable, her black dress in decay. She was the dishonour of her sex, her situation, and her years. She was a fouler obscenity than the

inexperienced Samuel had ever conceived. And by the door stood her husband, neat, spotless, almost stately, the man who for thirty years had marshalled all his immense pride to suffer this woman, the jolly man who had laughed through thick and thin! Samuel remembered when they were married. And he remembered when, years after their marriage, she was still as pretty, artificial, coquettish, and adamantine in her caprices as a young harlot with a fool at her feet. Time and the slow wrath of God had changed her.

He remained master of himself and approached her; then stopped.

"But—" he stammered.

"Ay, Sam'l, lad!" said the old man from the door. "I doubt I've killed her! I doubt I've killed her! I took and shook her. I got her by the neck. And before I knew where I was, I'd done it. She'll never drink brandy again. This is what it's come to!"

He moved away.

All Samuel's flesh tingled as a heavy wave of emotion rolled through his being. It was just as if someone had dealt him a blow unimaginably tremendous. His heart shivered, as a ship shivers at the mountainous crash of the waters. He was numbed. He wanted to weep, to vomit, to die, to sink away. But a voice was whispering to him: "You will have to go through with this. You are in charge of this." He thought of *his* wife and child, innocently asleep in the cleanly pureness of *his* home. And he felt the roughness of his coat-collar round his neck and the insecurity of his trousers. He passed out of the room, shutting the door. And across the yard he had a momentary glimpse of those nude nocturnal forms, unconsciously attitudinizing in the bakehouse. And down the stairs came the protests of Dick, driven by pain into a monotonous silly blasphemy.

"I'll fetch Harrop," he said, melancholily, to his cousin.

The doctor's house was less than fifty yards off, and the doctor had a night-bell, which, though he was a much older man than his father had been at his age, he still answered promptly. No need to bombard the doctor's premises with Indian corn! While Samuel was parleying with the doctor through a window, the question ran incessantly through his mind: "What about telling the police?"

But when, in advance of old Harrop, he returned to Daniel's shop, lo! the policeman previously encountered had returned upon his beat, and Daniel was talking to him in the little doorway. No other soul was about. Down King Street, along Wedgwood Street, up the Square, towards Brougham Street, nothing but gas-lamps burning with their everlasting patience, and the blind façades of shops. Only in the second storey of the Bank Building at the top of the Square a light showed mysteriously through a blind. Somebody ill there!

The policeman was in a high state of nervous excitement. That had happened to him which had never happened to him before. Of the sixty policemen in Bursley, just he had been chosen by fate to fit the socket of destiny. He was startled.

"What's this, what's this, Mr Povey?" he turned hastily to Samuel. "What's this as Mr Councillor Povey is a-telling me?"

"You come in, sergeant," said Daniel.

"If I come in," said the policeman to Samuel, "you mun' go along Wedgwood Street, Mr Povey, and bring my mate. He should be on Duck Bank, by rights."

It was astonishing, when once the stone had begun to roll, how quickly it ran. In half an hour Samuel had actually parted from Daniel at the police-office behind the Shambles, and was hurrying to rouse his wife so that she could look after Dick Povey until he might be taken off to Pirehill Infirmary, as old Harrop had instantly, on seeing him, decreed.

"Ah!" he reflected in the turmoil of his soul: "God is not mocked!" That was his basic idea: God is not mocked! Daniel was a good fellow, honourable, brilliant; a figure in the world. But what of his licentious tongue? What of his frequenting of bars? (How had he come to miss that train from Liverpool? How?) For many years he, Samuel, had seen in Daniel a living refutation of the authenticity of the old Hebrew menaces. But he had been wrong, after all! God is not mocked! And Samuel was aware of a revulsion in himself towards that strict codified godliness from which, in thought, he had perhaps been slipping away.

And with it all he felt, too, a certain officious self-importance, as he woke his wife and essayed to break the news to her in a manner tactfully calm. He had assisted at the most overwhelming event ever known in the history of the town.

II

"Your muffler—I'll get it," said Constance. "Cyril, run upstairs and get father's muffler. You know the drawer."

Cyril ran. It behoved everybody, that morning, to be prompt and efficient.

"I don't need any muffler, thank you," said Samuel, coughing and smothering the cough.

"Oh! But, Sam—" Constance protested.

"Now please don't worry me!" said Samuel with frigid finality. "I've got quite enough—" He did not finish.

Constance sighed as her husband stepped, nervous and self-important, out of the side-door into the street. It was early, not yet eight o'clock, and the shop still unopened.

"Your father couldn't wait," Constance said to Cyril when he had thundered down the stairs in his heavy

schoolboy boots. “Give it to me.” She went to restore the muffler to its place.

The whole house was upset, and Amy still an invalid! Existence was disturbed; there vaguely seemed to be a thousand novel things to be done, and yet she could think of nothing whatever that she needed to do at that moment; so she occupied herself with the muffler. Before she reappeared Cyril had gone to school, he who was usually a laggard. The truth was that he could no longer contain within himself a recital of the night, and in particular of the fact that he had been the first to hear the summons of the murderer on the window-pane. This imperious news had to be imparted to somebody, as a preliminary to the thrilling of the whole school; and Cyril had issued forth in search of an appreciative and worthy confidant. He was scarcely five minutes after his father.

In St Luke’s Square was a crowd of quite two hundred persons, standing moveless in the November mud. The body of Mrs Daniel Povey had already been taken to the Tiger Hotel, and young Dick Povey was on his way in a covered waggonette to Pirehill Infirmary on the other side of Knype. The shop of the crime was closed, and the blinds drawn at the upper windows of the house. There was absolutely nothing to be seen, not even a policeman. Nevertheless the crowd stared with an extraordinary obstinate attentiveness at the fatal building in Boulton Terrace. Hypnotized by this face of bricks and mortar, it had apparently forgotten all earthly ties, and, regardless of breakfast and a livelihood, was determined to stare at it till the house fell down or otherwise rendered up its secret. Most of its component individuals wore neither overcoats nor collars, but were kept warm by a scarf round the neck and by dint of forcing their fingers into the farthest inch of their pockets. Then they would slowly lift one leg after the other. Starers of infirm purpose would occasionally detach themselves from the throng and sidle away, ashamed of their fickleness. But reinforcements were continually arriving. And to these new-comers all that had been said in gossip had to be repeated and repeated: the same questions, the same answers, the same exclamations, the same proverbial philosophy, the same prophecies recurred in all parts of the Square with an uncanny iterance. Well-dressed men spoke to mere professional loiterers; for this unparalleled and glorious sensation, whose uniqueness grew every instant more impressive, brought out the essential brotherhood of mankind. All had a peculiar feeling that the day was neither Sunday nor week-day, but some eighth day of the week. Yet in the St Luke’s Covered Market close by, the stallkeepers were preparing their stalls just as though it were Saturday, just as though a Town Councillor had not murdered his wife—at last! It was stated, and restated infinitely, that the Povey baking had been taken over by Brindley, the second-best baker and confectioner, who had a stall in the market. And it was asserted, as a philosophical truth, and reasserted infinitely, that there would have been no sense in wasting good food.

Samuel’s emergence stirred the multitude. But Samuel passed up the Square with a rapt expression; he might have been under an illusion, caused by the extreme gravity of his preoccupations, that he was crossing a deserted Square. He hurried past the Bank and down the Turnhill Road, to the private residence of “Young Lawton,” son of the deceased “Lawyer Lawton.” Young Lawton followed his father’s profession; he was, as his father had been, the most successful solicitor in the town (though reputed by his learned rivals to be a fool), but the custom of calling men by their occupations had died out with horse-cars. Samuel caught young Lawton at his breakfast, and presently drove with him, in the Lawton buggy, to the police-station, where their arrival electrified a crowd as large as that in St Luke’s Square. Later, they drove together to Hanbridge, informally to brief a barrister; and Samuel, not permitted to be present at the first part of the interview between the solicitor and the barrister, was humbled before the pomposity of legal etiquette.

It seemed to Samuel a game. The whole rigmarole of police and police-cells and formalities seemed insincere. His cousin’s case was not like any other case, and, though formalities might be necessary, it was rather absurd to pretend that it was like any other case. In what manner it differed from other cases Samuel did not analytically inquire. He thought young Lawton was self-important, and Daniel too humble, in the colloquy of these two, and he endeavoured to indicate, by the dignity of his own demeanour, that in his opinion the proper relative tones had not been set. He could not understand Daniel’s attitude, for he lacked imagination to realize what Daniel had been through. After all, Daniel was not a murderer; his wife’s death was due to accident, was simply a mishap.

But in the crowded and stinking court-room of the Town Hall, Samuel began to feel qualms. It occurred that the Stipendiary Magistrate was sitting that morning at Bursley. He sat alone, as not one of the Borough Justices cared to occupy the bench while a Town Councillor was in the dock. The Stipendiary, recently appointed, was a young man, from the southern part of the county; and a Town Councillor of Bursley was no more to him than a petty tradesman to a man of fashion. He was youthfully enthusiastic for the majesty and the impartiality of English justice, and behaved as though the entire responsibility for the safety of that vast fabric rested on his shoulders. He and the barrister from Hanbridge had had a historic quarrel at Cambridge, and their behaviour to each other was a lesson to the vulgar in the art of chill and consummate politeness. Young Lawton, having been to Oxford, secretly scorned the pair of them, but, as he had engaged counsel, he of course was precluded from adding to the eloquence, which chagrined him. These three were the aristocracy of the court-room; they knew it; Samuel Povey knew it; everybody knew it, and felt it. The barrister brought an unexceptionable zeal to the performance of his duties; he referred in suitable terms to Daniel’s character and high position in the town, but nothing could hide the fact that for him too his client was a petty

tradesman accused of simple murder. Naturally the Stipendiary was bound to show that before the law all men are equal—the Town Councillor and the common tippler; he succeeded. The policeman gave his evidence, and the Inspector swore to what Daniel Povey had said when charged. The hearing proceeded so smoothly and quickly that it seemed naught but an empty rite, with Daniel as a lay figure in it. The Stipendiary achieved marvellously the illusion that to him a murder by a Town Councillor in St Luke's Square was quite an everyday matter. Bail was inconceivable, and the barrister, being unable to suggest any reason why the Stipendiary should grant a remand—indeed, there was no reason—Daniel Povey was committed to the Stafford Assizes for trial. The Stipendiary instantly turned to the consideration of an alleged offence against the Factory Acts by a large local firm of potters. The young magistrate had mistaken his vocation. With his steely calm, with his imperturbable detachment from weak humanity, he ought to have been a General of the Order of Jesuits.

Daniel was removed—he did not go: he was removed, by two bare-headed constables. Samuel wanted to have speech with him, and could not. And later, Samuel stood in the porch of the Town Hall, and Daniel appeared out of a corridor, still in the keeping of two policemen, helmeted now. And down below at the bottom of the broad flight of steps, up which passed dancers on the nights of subscription balls, was a dense crowd, held at bay by other policemen; and beyond the crowd a black van. And Daniel—to his cousin a sort of Christ between thieves—was hurried past the privileged loafers in the corridor, and down the broad steps. A murmuring wave agitated the crowd. Unkempt idlers and ne'er-do-wells in corduroy leaped up like tigers in the air, and the policemen fought them back furiously. And Daniel and his guardians shot through the little living lane. Quick! Quick! For the captive is more sacred even than a messiah. The law has him in charge! And like a feat of prestidigitation Daniel disappeared into the blackness of the van. A door slammed loudly, triumphantly, and a whip cracked. The crowd had been balked. It was as though the crowd had yelled for Daniel's blood and bones, and the faithful constables had saved him from their lust.

Yes, Samuel had qualms. He had a sickness in the stomach.

The aged Superintendent of Police walked by, with the aged Rector. The Rector was Daniel's friend. Never before had the Rector spoken to the Nonconformist Samuel, but now he spoke to him; he squeezed his hand.

"Ah, Mr Povey!" he ejaculated grievously.

"I—I'm afraid it's serious!" Samuel stammered. He hated to admit that it was serious, but the words came out of his mouth.

He looked at the Superintendent of Police, expecting the Superintendent to assure him that it was not serious; but the Superintendent only raised his small white-bearded chin, saying nothing. The Rector shook his head, and shook a senile tear out of his eye.

After another chat with young Lawton, Samuel, on behalf of Daniel, dropped his pose of the righteous man to whom a mere mishap has occurred, and who is determined, with the lofty pride of innocence, to indulge all the whims of the law, to be more royalist than the king. He perceived that the law must be fought with its own weapons, that no advantage must be surrendered, and every possible advantage seized. He was truly astonished at himself that such a pose had ever been adopted. His eyes were opened; he saw things as they were.

He returned home through a Square that was more interested than ever in the façade of his cousin's house. People were beginning to come from Hanbridge, Knype, Longshaw, Turnhill, and villages such as Moorthorne, to gaze at that façade. And the fourth edition of the *Signal,* containing a full report of what the Stipendiary and the barrister had said to each other, was being cried.

In his shop he found customers, as absorbed in the trivialities of purchase as though nothing whatever had happened. He was shocked; he resented their callousness.

"I'm too busy now," he said curtly to one who accosted him.

"Sam!" his wife called him in a low voice. She was standing behind the till.

"What is it?" He was ready to crush, and especially to crush indiscreet babble in the shop. He thought she was going to vent her womanly curiosity at once.

"Mr Huntbach is waiting for you in the parlour," said Constance.

"Mr Huntbach?"

"Yes, from Longshaw." She whispered, "It's Mr Povey's cousin. He's come to see about the funeral and so on, the—the inquest, I suppose."

Samuel paused. "Oh, has he!" said he defiantly. "Well, I'll see him. If he *wants* to see me, I'll see him."

That evening Constance learned all that was in his mind of bitterness against the memory of the dead woman whose failings had brought Daniel Povey to Stafford gaol and Dick to the Pirehill Infirmary. Again and again, in the ensuing days, he referred to the state of foul discomfort which he had discovered in Daniel's house. He nursed a feud against all her relatives, and when, after the inquest, at which he gave evidence full of resentment, she was buried, he vented an angry sigh of relief, and said: "Well, *she's* out of the way!" Thenceforward he had a mission, religious in its solemn intensity, to defend and save Daniel. He took the enterprise upon himself, spending the whole of himself upon it, to the neglect of his business and the scorn of his health. He lived solely for Daniel's trial, pouring out money in preparation for it. He thought and spoke of nothing else. The affair was his one preoccupation. And as the weeks passed, he became more and more sure

of success, more and more sure that he would return with Daniel to Bursley in triumph after the assize. He was convinced of the impossibility that "anything should happen" to Daniel; the circumstances were too clear, too overwhelmingly in Daniel's favour.

When Brindley, the second-best baker and confectioner, made an offer for Daniel's business as a going concern, he was indignant at first. Then Constance, and the lawyer, and Daniel (whom he saw on every permitted occasion) between them persuaded him that if some arrangement was not made, and made quickly, the business would lose all its value, and he consented, on Daniel's behalf, to a temporary agreement under which Brindley should reopen the shop and manage it on certain terms until Daniel regained his freedom towards the end of January. He would not listen to Daniel's plaintive insistence that he would never care to be seen in Bursley again. He pooh-poohed it. He protested furiously that the whole town was seething with sympathy for Daniel; and this was true. He became Daniel's defending angel, rescuing Daniel from Daniel's own weakness and apathy. He became, indeed, Daniel.

One morning the shop-shutter was wound up, and Brindley, inflated with the importance of controlling two establishments, strutted in and out under the sign of Daniel Povey. And traffic in bread and cakes and flour was resumed. Apparently the sea of time had risen and covered Daniel and all that was his; for his wife was under earth, and Dick lingered at Pirehill, unable to stand, and Daniel was locked away. Apparently, in the regular flow of the life of the Square, Daniel was forgotten. But not in Samuel Povey's heart was he forgotten! There, before an altar erected to the martyr, the sacred flame of a new faith burned with fierce consistency. Samuel, in his greying middle-age, had inherited the eternal youth of the apostle.

III

On the dark winter morning when Samuel set off to the grand assize, Constance did not ask his views as to what protection he would adopt against the weather. She silently ranged special underclothing, and by the warmth of the fire, which for days she had kept ablaze in the bedroom, Samuel silently donned the special underclothing. Over that, with particular fastidious care, he put his best suit. Not a word was spoken. Constance and he were not estranged, but the relations between them were in a state of feverish excitation. Samuel had had a cold on his flat chest for weeks, and nothing that Constance could invent would move it. A few days in bed or even in one room at a uniform temperature would have surely worked the cure. Samuel, however, would not stay in one room; he would not stay in the house, nor yet in Bursley. He would take his lacerating cough on chilly trains to Stafford. He had no ears for reason; he simply could not listen; he was in a dream. After Christmas a crisis came. Constance grew desperate. It was a battle between her will and his that occurred one night when Constance, marshalling all her forces, suddenly insisted that he must go out no more until he was cured. In the fight Constance was scarcely recognizable. She deliberately gave way to hysteria; she was no longer soft and gentle; she flung bitterness at him like vitriol; she shrieked like a common shrew. It seems almost incredible that Constance could have gone so far; but she did. She accused him, amid sobs, of putting his cousin before his wife and son, of not caring whether or not she was left a widow as the result of his obstinacy. And she ended by crying passionately that she might as well talk to a post. She might just as well have talked to a post. Samuel answered quietly and coldly. He told her that it was useless for her to put herself about, as he should act as he thought fit. It was a most extraordinary scene, and quite unique in their annals. Constance was beaten. She accepted the defeat, gradually controlling her sobs and changing her tone to the tone of the vanquished.

She kissed him in bed, kissing the rod. And he gravely kissed her.

Henceforward she knew, in practice, what the inevitable, when you have to live with it, may contain of anguish wretched and humiliating. Her husband was risking his life, so she was absolutely convinced, and she could do nothing; she had come to the bed-rock of Samuel's character. She felt that, for the time being, she had a madman in the house, who could not be treated according to ordinary principles. The continual strain aged her. Her one source of relief was to talk with Cyril. She talked to him without reserve, and the words "your father," "your father," were everlastingly on her complaining tongue. Yes, she was utterly changed. Often she would weep when alone.

Nevertheless she frequently forgot that she had been beaten. She had no notion of honourable warfare. She was always beginning again, always firing under a flag of truce; and thus she constituted a very inconvenient opponent. Samuel was obliged, while hardening on the main point, to compromise on lesser questions. She too could be formidable, and when her lips took a certain pose, and her eyes glowed, he would have put on forty mufflers had she commanded. Thus it was she who arranged all the details of the supreme journey to Stafford. Samuel was to drive to Knype, so as to avoid the rigours of the Loop Line train from Bursley and the waiting on cold platforms. At Knype he was to take the express, and to travel first-class.

After he was dressed on that gas-lit morning, he learnt bit by bit the extent of her elaborate preparations. The breakfast was a special breakfast, and he had to eat it all. Then the cab came, and he saw Amy put hot bricks into it. Constance herself put goloshes over his boots, not because it was damp, but because indiarubber keeps the feet warm. Constance herself bandaged his neck, and unbuttoned his waistcoat and stuck an extra flannel under his dickey. Constance herself warmed his woollen gloves, and enveloped him in his largest

overcoat.

Samuel then saw Cyril getting ready to go out. “Where are you off?” he demanded.

“He’s going with you as far as Knype,” said Constance grimly. “He’ll see you into the train and then come back here in the cab.”

She had sprung this indignity upon him. She glared. Cyril glanced with timid bravado from one to the other. Samuel had to yield.

Thus in the winter darkness—for it was not yet dawn—Samuel set forth to the trial, escorted by his son. The reverberation of his appalling cough from the cab was the last thing that Constance heard.

During most of the day Constance sat in “Miss Insull’s corner” in the shop. Twenty years ago this very corner had been hers. But now, instead of large millinery-boxes enwrapped in brown paper, it was shut off from the rest of the counter by a rich screen of mahogany and ground-glass, and within the enclosed space all the apparatus necessary to the activity of Miss Insull had been provided for. However, it remained the coldest part of the whole shop, as Miss Insull’s fingers testified. Constance established herself there more from a desire to do something, to interfere in something, than from a necessity of supervising the shop, though she had said to Samuel that she would keep an eye on the shop. Miss Insull, whose throne was usurped, had to sit by the stove with less important creatures; she did not like it, and her underlings suffered accordingly.

It was a long day. Towards tea-time, just before Cyril was due from school, Mr Critchlow came surprisingly in. That is to say, his arrival was less of a surprise to Miss Insull and the rest of the staff than to Constance. For he had lately formed an irregular habit of popping in at tea-time, to chat with Miss Insull. Mr Critchlow was still defying time. He kept his long, thin figure perfectly erect. His features had not altered. His hair and beard could not have been whiter than they had been for years past. He wore his long white apron, and over that a thick reefer jacket. In his long, knotty fingers he carried a copy of the *Signal*.

Evidently he had not expected to find the corner occupied by Constance. She was sewing.

“So it’s you!” he said, in his unpleasant, grating voice, not even glancing at Miss Insull. He had gained the reputation of being the rudest old man in Bursley. But his general demeanour expressed indifference rather than rudeness. It was a manner that said: “You’ve got to take me as I am. I may be an egotist, hard, mean, and convinced; but those who don’t like it can lump it. I’m indifferent.”

He put one elbow on the top of the screen, showing the *Signal*.

“Mr Critchlow!” said Constance, primly; she had acquired Samuel’s dislike of him.

“It’s begun!” he observed with mysterious glee.

“Has it?” Constance said eagerly. “Is it in the paper already?”

She had been far more disturbed about her husband’s health than about the trial of Daniel Povey for murder, but her interest in the trial was of course tremendous. And this news, that it had actually begun, thrilled her.

“Ay!” said Mr Critchlow. “Didn’t ye hear the *Signal* boy hollering just now all over the Square?”

“No,” said Constance. For her, newspapers did not exist. She never had the idea of opening one, never felt any curiosity which she could not satisfy, if she could satisfy it at all, without the powerful aid of the Press. And even on this day it had not occurred to her that the *Signal* might be worth opening.

“Ay!” repeated Mr Critchlow. “Seemingly it began at two o’clock—or thereabouts.” He gave a moment of his attention to a noisy gas-jet, which he carefully lowered.

“What does it say?”

“Nothing yet!” said Mr Critchlow; and they read the few brief sentences, under their big heading, which described the formal commencement of the trial of Daniel Povey for the murder of his wife. “There was some as said,” he remarked, pushing up his spectacles, “that grand jury would alter the charge, or summat!” He laughed, grimly tolerant of the extreme absurdity. “Ah!” he added contemplatively, turning his head to see if the assistants were listening. They were. It would have been too much, on such a day, to expect a strict adherence to the etiquette of the shop.

Constance had been hearing a good deal lately of grand juries, but she had understood nothing, nor had she sought to understand.

“I’m very glad it’s come on so soon,” she said. “In a sense, that is! I was afraid Sam might be kept at Stafford for days. Do you think it will last long?”

“Not it!” said Mr Critchlow, positively. “There’s naught in it to spin out.”

Then a silence, punctuated by the sound of stitching.

Constance would really have preferred not to converse with the old man; but the desire for reassurance, for the calming of her own fears, forced her to speak, though she knew well that Mr Critchlow was precisely the last man in the town to give moral assistance if he thought it was wanted.

“I do hope everything will be all right!” she murmured.

“Everything’ll be all right!” he said gaily. “Everything’ll be all right. Only it’ll be all wrong for Dan.”

“Whatever do you mean, Mr Critchlow?” she protested. Nothing, she reflected, could rouse pity in that heart, not even a tragedy like Daniel’s. She bit her lip for having spoken.

“Well,” he said in loud tones, frankly addressing the girls round the stove as much as Constance. “I’ve met with some rare good arguments this new year, no mistake! There’s been some as say that Dan never meant to

do it. That's as may be. But if it's a good reason for not hanging, there's an end to capital punishment in this country. 'Never meant'! There's a lot of 'em as 'never meant'! Then I'm told as she was a gallivanting woman and no housekeeper, and as often drunk as sober. I'd no call to be told that. If strangling is a right punishment for a wife as spends her time in drinking brandy instead of sweeping floors and airing sheets, then Dan's safe. But I don't seem to see Judge Lindley telling the jury as it is. I've been a juryman under Judge Lindley myself—and more than once—and I don't seem to see him, like!" He paused with his mouth open. "As for all them nobs," he continued, "including th' rector, as have gone to Stafford to kiss the book and swear that Dan's reputation is second to none—if they could ha' sworn as Dan wasn't in th' house at all that night, if they could ha' sworn he was in Jericho, there'd ha' been some sense in their going. But as it is, they'd ha' done better to stop at home and mind their business. Bless us! Sam wanted *me* to go!"

He laughed again, in the faces of the horrified and angry women.

"I'm surprised at you, Mr Critchlow! I really am!" Constance exclaimed.

And the assistants inarticulately supported her with vague sounds. Miss Insull got up and poked the stove. Every soul in the establishment was loyally convinced that Daniel Povey would be acquitted, and to breathe a doubt on the brightness of this certainty was a hideous crime. The conviction was not within the domain of reason; it was an act of faith; and arguments merely fretted, without in the slightest degree disturbing it.

"Ye may be!" Mr Critchlow gaily concurred. He was very content.

Just as he shuffled round to leave the shop, Cyril entered.

"Good afternoon, Mr Critchlow," said Cyril, sheepishly polite.

Mr Critchlow gazed hard at the boy, then nodded his head several times rapidly, as though to say: "Here's another fool in the making! So the generations follow one another!" He made no answer to the salutation, and departed.

Cyril ran round to his mother's corner, pitching his bag on to the showroom stairs as he passed them. Taking off his hat, he kissed her, and she unbuttoned his overcoat with her cold hands.

"What's old Methuselah after?" he demanded.

"Hush!" Constance softly corrected him. "He came in to tell me the trial had started."

"Oh, I knew that! A boy bought a paper and I saw it. I say, mother, will father be in the paper?" And then in a different tone: "I say, mother, what is there for tea?"

When his stomach had learnt exactly what there was for tea, the boy began to show an immense and talkative curiosity in the trial. He would not set himself to his home-lessons. "It's no use, mother," he said, "I can't." They returned to the shop together, and Cyril would go every moment to the door to listen for the cry of a newsboy. Presently he hit upon the idea that perhaps newsboys might be crying the special edition of the *Signal* in the marketplace, in front of the Town Hall, to the neglect of St Luke's Square. And nothing would satisfy him but he must go forth and see. He went, without his overcoat, promising to run. The shop waited with a strange anxiety. Cyril had created, by his restless movements to and fro, an atmosphere of strained expectancy. It seemed now as if the whole town stood with beating heart, fearful of tidings and yet burning to get them. Constance pictured Stafford, which she had never seen, and a court of justice, which she had never seen, and her husband and Daniel in it. And she waited.

Cyril ran in. "No!" he announced breathlessly. "Nothing yet."

"Don't take cold, now you're hot," Constance advised.

But he would keep near the door. Soon he ran off again.

And perhaps fifteen seconds after he had gone, the strident cry of a *Signal* boy was heard in the distance, faint and indistinct at first, then clearer and louder.

"There's a paper!" said the apprentice.

"Sh!" said Constance, listening.

"Sh!" echoed Miss Insull.

"Yes, it is!" said Constance. "Miss Insull, just step out and get a paper. Here's a halfpenny."

The halfpenny passed quickly from one thimbled hand to another. Miss Insull scurried.

She came in triumphantly with the sheet, which Constance tremblingly took. Constance could not find the report at first. Miss Insull pointed to it, and read—

" 'Summing up'! Lower down, lower down! 'After an absence of thirty-five minutes the jury found the prisoner guilty of murder, with a recommendation to mercy. The judge assumed the black cap and pronounced sentence of death, saying that he would forward the recommendation to the proper quarter.' "

Cyril returned. "Not yet!" he was saying—when he saw the paper lying on the counter. His crest fell.

Long after the shop was shut, Constance and Cyril waited in the parlour for the arrival of the master of the house. Constance was in the blackest despair. She saw nothing but death around her. She thought: misfortunes never come singly. Why did not Samuel come? All was ready for him, everything that her imagination could suggest, in the way of food, remedies, and the means of warmth. Amy was not allowed to go to bed, lest she might be needed. Constance did not even hint that Cyril should go to bed. The dark, dreadful minutes ticked themselves off on the mantelpiece until only five minutes separated Constance from the moment when she would not know what to do next. It was twenty-five minutes past eleven. If at half-past Samuel did not appear, then he could not come that night, unless the last train from Stafford was

inconceivably late.

The sound of a carriage! It ceased at the door. Mother and son sprang up.

Yes, it was Samuel! She beheld him once more. And the sight of his condition, moral and physical, terrified her. His great strapping son and Amy helped him upstairs. “Will he ever come down those stairs again?” This thought lanced Constance’s heart. The pain was come and gone in a moment, but it had surprised her tranquil common sense, which was naturally opposed to, and gently scornful of, hysterical fears. As she puffed, with her stoutness, up the stairs, that bland cheerfulness of hers cost her an immense effort of will. She was profoundly troubled; great disasters seemed to be slowly approaching her from all quarters.

Should she send for the doctor? No. To do so would only be a concession to the panic instinct. She knew exactly what was the matter with Samuel: a severe cough persistently neglected, no more. As she had expressed herself many times to inquirers, “He’s never been what you may call ill.” Nevertheless, as she laid him in bed and posseted him, how frail and fragile he looked! And he was so exhausted that he would never even talk about the trial.

“If he’s not better tomorrow I *shall* send for the doctor!” she said to herself. As for his getting up, she swore she would keep him in bed by force if necessary.

IV

The next morning she was glad and proud that she had not yielded to a scare. For he was most strangely and obviously better. He had slept heavily, and she had slept a little. True that Daniel was condemned to death! Leaving Daniel to his fate, she was conscious of joy springing in her heart. How absurd to have asked herself: “Will he ever come down those stairs again?”!

A message reached her from the forgotten shop during the morning, that Mr Lawton had called to see Mr Povey. Already Samuel had wanted to arise, but she had forbidden it in the tone of a woman who is dangerous, and Samuel had been very reasonable. He now said that Mr Lawton must be asked up. She glanced round the bedroom. It was “done”; it was faultlessly correct as a sick chamber. She agreed to the introduction into it of the man from another sphere, and after a preliminary minute she left the two to talk together. This visit of young Lawton’s was a dramatic proof of Samuel’s importance, and of the importance of the matter in hand. The august occasion demanded etiquette, and etiquette said that a wife should depart from her husband when he had to transact affairs beyond the grasp of a wife.

The idea of a petition to the Home Secretary took shape at this interview, and before the day was out it had spread over the town and over the Five Towns, and it was in the *Signal*. The *Signal* spoke of Daniel Povey as “the condemned man.” And the phrase started the whole district into an indignant agitation for his reprieve. The district woke up to the fact that a Town Councillor, a figure in the world, an honest tradesman of unspotted character, was cooped solitary in a little cell at Stafford, waiting to be hanged by the neck till he was dead. The district determined that this must not and should not be. Why! Dan Povey had actually once been Chairman of the Bursley Society for the Prosecution of Felons, that association for annual eating and drinking, whose members humorously called each other “felons”! Impossible, monstrous, that an ex-chairman of the “Felons” should be a sentenced criminal!

However, there was nothing to fear. No Home Secretary would dare to run counter to the jury’s recommendation and the expressed wish of the whole district. Besides, the Home Secretary’s nephew was M.P. for the Knype division. Of course a verdict of guilty had been inevitable. Everybody recognized that now. Even Samuel and all the hottest partisans of Daniel Povey recognized it. They talked as if they had always foreseen it, directly contradicting all that they had said on only the previous day. Without any sense of any inconsistency or of shame, they took up an absolutely new position. The structure of blind faith had once again crumbled at the assault of realities, and unhealthy, un-English truths, the statement of which would have meant ostracism twenty-four hours earlier, became suddenly the platitudes of the Square and the market-place.

Despatch was necessary in the affair of the petition, for the condemned man had but three Sundays. But there was delay at the beginning, because neither young Lawton nor any of his colleagues was acquainted with the proper formula of a petition to the Home Secretary for the reprieve of a criminal condemned to death. No such petition had been made in the district within living memory. And at first young Lawton could not get sight or copy of any such petition anywhere, in the Five Towns or out of them. Of course there must exist a proper formula, and of course that formula and no other could be employed. Nobody was bold enough to suggest that young Lawton should commence the petition, “To the Most Noble the Marquess of Welwyn, K.C.B., May it please your Lordship,” and end it, “And your petitioners will ever pray!” and insert between those phrases a simple appeal for the reprieve, with a statement of reasons. No! the formula consecrated by tradition must be found. And, after Daniel had arrived a day and a half nearer death, it was found. A lawyer at Alnwick had the draft of a petition which had secured for a murderer in Northumberland twenty years’ penal servitude instead of sudden death, and on request he lent it to young Lawton. The prime movers in the petition felt that Daniel Povey was now as good as saved. Hundreds of forms were printed to receive signatures, and these forms, together with copies of the petition, were laid on the counters of all the principal

shops, not merely in Bursley, but in the other towns. They were also to be found at the offices of the *Signal,* in railway waiting-rooms, and in the various reading-rooms; and on the second of Daniel's three Sundays they were exposed in the porches of Churches and chapels. Chapelkeepers and vergers would come to Samuel and ask with the heavy inertia of their stupidity: "About pens and ink, sir?" These officials had the air of audaciously disturbing the sacrosanct routine of centuries in order to confer a favour.

Samuel continued to improve. His cough shook him less, and his appetite increased. Constance allowed him to establish himself in the drawing-room, which was next to the bedroom, and of which the grate was particularly efficient. Here, in an old winter overcoat, he directed the vast affair of the petition, which grew daily to vaster proportions. Samuel dreamed of twenty thousand signatures. Each sheet held twenty signatures, and several times a day he counted the sheets; the supply of forms actually failed once, and Constance herself had to hurry to the printers to order more. Samuel was put into a passion by this carelessness of the printers. He offered Cyril sixpence for every sheet of signatures which the boy would obtain. At first Cyril was too shy to canvass, but his father made him blush, and in a few hours Cyril had developed into an eager canvasser. One whole day he stayed away from school to canvass. Altogether he earned over fifteen shillings, quite honestly except that he got a companion to forge a couple of signatures with addresses lacking at the end of a last sheet, generously rewarding him with sixpence, the value of the entire sheet.

When Samuel had received a thousand sheets with twenty thousand signatures, he set his heart on twenty-five thousand signatures. And he also announced his firm intention of accompanying young Lawton to London with the petition. The petition had, in fact, become one of the most remarkable petitions of modern times. So the *Signal* said. The *Signal* gave a daily account of its progress, and its progress was astonishing. In certain streets every householder had signed it. The first sheets had been reserved for the signatures of members of Parliament, ministers of religion, civic dignitaries, justices of the peace, etc. These sheets were nobly filled. The aged rector of Bursley signed first of all; after him the Mayor of Bursley, as was right; then sundry M.P.s.

Samuel emerged from the drawing-room. He went into the parlour, and, later, into the shop; and no evil consequence followed. His cough was nearly, but not quite, cured. The weather was extraordinarily mild for the season. He repeated that he should go with the petition to London; and he went; Constance could not validly oppose the journey. She, too, was a little intoxicated by the petition. It weighed considerably over a hundredweight. The crowning signature, that of the M.P. for Knype, was duly obtained in London, and Samuel's one disappointment was that his hope of twenty-five thousand signatures had fallen short of realization—by only a few score. The few score could have been got had not time urgently pressed. He returned from London a man of mark, full of confidence; but his cough was worse again.

His confidence in the power of public opinion and the inherent virtue of justice might have proved to be well placed, had not the Home Secretary happened to be one of your humane officials. The Marquess of Welwyn was celebrated through every stratum of the governing classes for his humane instincts, which were continually fighting against his sense of duty. Unfortunately his sense of duty, which he had inherited from several centuries of ancestors, made havoc among his humane instincts on nearly every occasion of conflict. It was reported that he suffered horribly in consequence. Others also suffered, for he was never known to advise a remission of a sentence of flogging. Certain capital sentences he had commuted, but he did not commute Daniel Povey's. He could not permit himself to be influenced by a wave of popular sentiment, and assuredly not by his own nephew's signature. He gave to the case the patient, remorseless examination which he gave to every case. He spent a sleepless night in trying to discover a reason for yielding to his humane instincts, but without success. As Judge Lindley remarked in his confidential report, the sole arguments in favour of Daniel were provocation and his previous high character; and these were no sort of an argument. The provocation was utterly inadequate, and the previous high character was quite too ludicrously beside the point. So once more the Marquis's humane instincts were routed and he suffered horribly.

V

On the Sunday morning after the day on which the *Signal* had printed the menu of Daniel Povey's supreme breakfast, and the exact length of the "drop" which the executioner had administered to him, Constance and Cyril stood together at the window of the large bedroom. The boy was in his best clothes; but Constance's garments gave no sign of the Sabbath. She wore a large apron over an old dress that was rather tight for her. She was pale and looked ill.

"Oh, mother!" Cyril exclaimed suddenly. "Listen! I'm sure I can hear the band."

She checked him with a soundless movement of her lips; and they both glanced anxiously at the silent bed, Cyril with a gesture of apology for having forgotten that he must make no noise.

The strains of the band came from down King Street, in the direction of St Luke's Church. The music appeared to linger a long time in the distance, and then it approached, growing louder, and the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band passed under the window at the solemn pace of Handel's "Dead March." The effect of that requiem, heavy with its own inherent beauty and with the vast weight of harrowing tradition, was to wring the tears from Constance's eyes; they fell on her aproned bosom, and she sank into a chair. And though the

cheeks of the trumpeters were puffed out, and though the drummer had to protrude his stomach and arch his spine backwards lest he should tumble over his drum, there was majesty in the passage of the band. The boom of the drum, desolating the interruptions of the melody, made sick the heart, but with a lofty grief; and the dirge seemed to be weaving a purple pall that covered every meanness.

The bandsmen were not all in black, but they all wore crape on their sleeves and their instruments were knotted with crape. They carried in their hats a black-edged card. Cyril held one of these cards in his hands. It ran thus:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
DANIEL POVEY
A TOWN COUNCILLOR OF THIS TOWN
JUDICIALLY MURDERED AT 8 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING
8TH FEBRUARY 1888
"HE WAS MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN SINNING"

In the wake of the band came the aged Rector, bareheaded, and wearing a surplice over his overcoat; his thin white hair was disarranged by the breeze that played in the chilly sunshine; his hands were folded on a gilt-edged book. A curate, churchwardens, and sidesmen followed. And after these, tramping through the dark mud in a procession that had apparently no end, wound the unofficial male multitude, nearly all in mourning, and all, save the more aristocratic, carrying the memorial card in their hats. Loafers, women, and children had collected on the drying pavements, and a window just opposite Constance was ornamented with the entire family of the landlord of the Sun Vaults. In the great bar of the Vaults a barman was craning over the pitch-pine screen that secured privacy to drinkers. The procession continued without break, eternally rising over the verge of King Street "bank", and eternally vanishing round the corner into St Luke's Square; at intervals it was punctuated by a clergyman, a Nonconformist minister, a town crier, a group of foremen, or a few Rifle Volunteers. The watching crowd grew as the procession lengthened. Then another band was heard, also playing the march from *Saul*. The first band had now reached the top of the Square, and was scarcely audible from King Street. The reiterated glitter in the sun of memorial cards in hats gave the fanciful illusion of an impossible whitish snake that was straggling across the town. Three-quarters of an hour elapsed before the tail of the snake came into view, and a rabble of unkempt boys closed in upon it, filling the street.

"I shall go to the drawing-room window, mother," said Cyril.

She nodded. He crept out of the bedroom.

St Luke's Square was a sea of hats and memorial cards. Most of the occupiers of the Square had hung out flags at half-mast, and a flag at half-mast was flying over the Town Hall in the distance. Sightseers were at every window. The two bands had united at the top of the Square; and behind them, on a North Staffordshire Railway lorry, stood the white-clad Rector and several black figures. The Rector was speaking; but only those close to the lorry could hear his feeble treble voice.

Such was the massive protest of Bursley against what Bursley regarded as a callous injustice. The execution of Daniel Povey had most genuinely excited the indignation of the town. That execution was not only an injustice; it was an insult, a humiliating snub. And the worst was that the rest of the country had really discovered no sympathetic interest in the affair. Certain London papers, indeed, in commenting casually on the execution, had slurred the morals and manners of the Five Towns, professing to regard the district as notoriously beyond the realm of the Ten Commandments. This had helped to render furious the townsmen. This, as much as anything, had encouraged the spontaneous outburst of feeling which had culminated in a St Luke's Square full of people with memorial cards in their hats. The demonstration had scarcely been organized; it had somehow organized itself, employing the places of worship and a few clubs as centres of gathering. And it proved an immense success. There were seven or eight thousand people in the Square, and the pity was that England as a whole could not have had a glimpse of the spectacle. Since the execution of the elephant, nothing had so profoundly agitated Bursley. Constance, who left the bedroom momentarily for the drawing-room, reflected that the death and burial of Cyril's honoured grandfather, though a resounding event, had not caused one-tenth of the stir which she beheld. But then John Baines had killed nobody.

The Rector spoke too long; everyone felt that. But at length he finished. The bands performed the Doxology, and the immense multitudes began to disperse by the eight streets that radiate from the Square. At the same time one o'clock struck, and the public-houses opened with their customary admirable promptitude. Respectable persons, of course, ignored the public-houses and hastened homewards to a delayed dinner. But in a town of over thirty thousand souls there are sufficient dregs to fill all the public-houses on an occasion of ceremonial excitement. Constance saw the bar of the Vaults crammed with individuals whose sense of decent fitness was imperfect. The barman and the landlord and the principal members of the landlord's family were hard put to it to quench that funereal thirst. Constance, as she ate a little meal in the bedroom, could not but witness the orgy. A bandsman with his silver instrument was prominent at the counter. At five minutes to three the Vaults spewed forth a squirt of roysterers who walked on the pavement as on a tight-rope; among them was the bandsman, his silver instrument only half enveloped in its bag of green serge. He established an equilibrium in the gutter. It would not have mattered so seriously if he had not been a bandsman. The barman

and the landlord pushed the ultimate sot by force into the street and bolted the door (till six o'clock) just as a policeman strolled along, the first policeman of the day. It became known that similar scenes were enacting at the thresholds of other inns. And the judicious were sad.

VI

When the altercation between the policeman and the musician in the gutter was at its height, Samuel Povey became restless; but since he had scarcely stirred through the performances of the bands, it was probably not the cries of the drunkard that had aroused him.

He had shown very little interest in the preliminaries of the great demonstration. The flame of his passion for the case of Daniel Povey seemed to have shot up on the day before the execution, and then to have expired. On that day he went to Stafford in order, by permit of the prison governor, to see his cousin for the last time. His condition then was undoubtedly not far removed from monomania. "Unhinged" was the conventional expression which frequently rose in Constance's mind as a description of the mind of her husband; but she fought it down; she would not have it; it was too crude—with its associations. She would only admit that the case had "got on" his mind. A startling proof of this was that he actually suggested taking Cyril with him to see the condemned man. He wished Cyril to see Daniel; he said gravely that he thought Cyril ought to see him. The proposal was monstrous, inexplicable—or explicable only by the assumption that his mind, while not unhinged, had temporarily lost its balance. Constance opposed an absolute negative, and Samuel being in every way enfeebled, she overcame. As for Cyril, he was divided between fear and curiosity. On the whole, perhaps Cyril regretted that he would not be able to say at school that he had had speech with the most celebrated killer of the age on the day before his execution.

Samuel returned hysterical from Stafford. His account of the scene, which he gave in a very loud voice, was a most absurd and yet pathetic recital, obviously distorted by memory. When he came to the point of the entrance of Dick Povey, who was still at the hospital, and who had been specially driven to Stafford and carried into the prison, he wept without restraint. His hysteria was painful in a very high degree.

He went to bed—of his own accord, for his cough had improved again. And on the following day, the day of the execution, he remained in bed till the afternoon. In the evening the Rector sent for him to the Rectory to discuss the proposed demonstration. On the next day, Saturday, he said he should not get up. Icy showers were sweeping the town, and his cough was worse after the evening visit to the Rector. Constance had no apprehension about him. The most dangerous part of the winter was over, and there was nothing now to force him into indiscretions. She said to herself calmly that he should stay in bed as long as he liked, that he could not have too much repose after the cruel fatigues; physical and spiritual, which he had suffered. His cough was short, but not as troublesome as in the past; his face flushed, dusky, and settled in gloom; and he was slightly feverish, with quick pulse and quick breathing—the symptoms of a renewed cold. He passed a wakeful night, broken by brief dreams in which he talked. At dawn he had some hot food, asked what day it was, frowned, and seemed to doze off at once. At eleven o'clock he had refused food. And he had intermittently dozed during the progress of the demonstration and its orgiastic sequel.

Constance had food ready for his waking, and she approached the bed and leaned over him. The fever had increased somewhat, the breathing was more rapid, and his lips were covered with tiny purple pimples. He feebly shook his head with a disgusted air, at her mention of food. It was this obstinate refusal of food which first alarmed her. A little uncomfortable suspicion shot up in her: Surely there's nothing the *matter* with him?

Something—impossible to say what—caused her to bend still lower, and put her ear to his chest. She heard within that mysterious box a rapid succession of thin, dry, crackling sounds: sounds such as she would have produced by rubbing her hair between her fingers close to her ear. The crepitation ceased, then recommenced, and she perceived that it coincided with the intake of his breath. He coughed; the sounds were intensified; a spasm of pain ran over his face; and he put his damp hand to his side.

"Pain in my side!" he whispered with difficulty.

Constance stepped into the drawing-room, where Cyril was sketching by the fire.

"Cyril," she said, "go across and ask Dr Harrop to come round at once. And if he isn't in, then his new partner."

"Is it for father?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter?"

"Now do as I say, please," said Constance, sharply, adding: "I don't know what's the matter. Perhaps nothing. But I'm not satisfied."

The venerable Harrop pronounced the word "pneumonia." It was acute double pneumonia that Samuel had got. During the three worst months of the year, he had escaped the fatal perils which await a man with a flat chest and a chronic cough, who ignores his condition and defies the weather. But a journey of five hundred yards to the Rectory had been one journey too many. The Rectory was so close to the shop that he had not troubled to wrap himself up as for an excursion to Stafford. He survived the crisis of the disease and then died of toxaemia, caused by a heart that would not do its duty by the blood. A casual death, scarce noticed in the

reaction after the great febrile demonstration! Besides, Samuel Povey never could impose himself on the burgesses. He lacked individuality. He was little. I have often laughed at Samuel Povey. But I liked and respected him. He was a very honest man. I have always been glad to think that, at the end of his life, destiny took hold of him and displayed, to the observant, the vein of greatness which runs through every soul without exception. He embraced a cause, lost it, and died of it.

CHAPTER VI

THE WIDOW

I

Constance, alone in the parlour, stood expectant by the set tea-table. She was not wearing weeds; her mother and she, on the death of her father, had talked of the various disadvantages of weeds; her mother had worn them unwillingly, and only because a public opinion not sufficiently advanced had intimidated her. Constance had said: “If ever I’m a widow I won’t wear them,” positively, in the tone of youth; and Mrs Baines had replied: “I hope you won’t, my dear.” That was over twenty years ago, but Constance perfectly remembered. And now, she was a widow! How strange and how impressive was life! And she had kept her word; not positively, not without hesitations; for though times were changed, Bursley was still Bursley; but she had kept it.

This was the first Monday after Samuel’s funeral. Existence in the house had been resumed on the plane which would henceforth be the normal plane. Constance had put on for tea a dress of black silk with a jet brooch of her mother’s. Her hands, just meticulously washed, had that feeling of being dirty which comes from roughening of the epidermis caused by a day spent in fingering stuffs. She had been “going through” Samuel’s things, and her own, and ranging all anew. It was astonishing how little the man had collected, of “things,” in the course of over half a century. All his clothes were contained in two long drawers and a short one. He had the least possible quantity of haberdashery and linen, for he invariably took from the shop such articles as he required, when he required them, and he would never preserve what was done with. He possessed no jewellery save a set of gold studs, a scarfring, and a wedding-ring; the wedding-ring was buried with him. Once, when Constance had offered him her father’s gold watch and chain, he had politely refused it, saying that he preferred his own—a silver watch (with a black cord) which kept excellent time; he had said later that she might save the gold watch and chain for Cyril when he was twenty-one. Beyond these trifles and a half-empty box of cigars and a pair of spectacles, he left nothing personal to himself. Some men leave behind them a litter which takes months to sift and distribute. But Samuel had not the mania for owning. Constance put his clothes in a box, to be given away gradually (all except an overcoat and handkerchiefs which might do for Cyril); she locked up the watch and its black cord, the spectacles and the scarf-ring; she gave the gold studs to Cyril; she climbed on a chair and hid the cigar-box on the top of her wardrobe; and scarce a trace of Samuel remained!

By his own wish the funeral had been as simple and private as possible. One or two distant relations, whom Constance scarcely knew and who would probably not visit her again, until she too was dead, came—and went. And lo! the affair was over. The simple celerity of the funeral would have satisfied even Samuel, whose tremendous self-esteem hid itself so effectually behind such externals that nobody had ever fully perceived it. Not even Constance quite knew Samuel’s secret opinion of Samuel. Constance was aware that he had a ridiculous side, that his greatest lack had been a lack of spectacular dignity. Even in the coffin, where nevertheless most people are finally effective, he had not been imposing—with his finicky little grey beard persistently sticking up.

The vision of him in his coffin—there in the churchyard, just at the end of King Street!—with the lid screwed down on that unimportant beard, recurred frequently in the mind of the widow, as something untrue and misleading. She had to say to herself: “Yes, he is really there! And that is why I have this particular feeling in my heart.” She saw him as an object pathetic and wistful, not majestic. And yet she genuinely thought that there could not exist another husband quite so honest, quite so just, quite so reliable, quite so good, as Samuel had been. What a conscience he had! How he would try, and try, to be fair with her! Twenty years she could remember, of ceaseless, constant endeavour on his part to behave rightly to her! She could

recall many an occasion when he had obviously checked himself, striving against his tendency to cold abruptness and to sullenness, in order to give her the respect due to a wife. What loyalty was his! How she could *depend on* him! How much better he was than herself (she thought with modesty)!

His death was an amputation for her. But she faced it with calmness. She was not bowed with sorrow. She did not nurse the idea that her life was at an end; on the contrary, she obstinately put it away from her, dwelling on Cyril. She did not indulge in the enervating voluptuousness of grief. She had begun in the first hours of bereavement by picturing herself as one marked out for the blows of fate. She had lost her father and her mother, and now her husband. Her career seemed to be punctuated by interments. But after a while her gentle common sense came to insist that most human beings lose their parents, and that every marriage must end in either a widower or a widow, and that all careers are punctuated by interments. Had she not had nearly twenty-one years of happy married life? (Twenty-one years—rolled up! The sudden thought of their naïve ignorance of life, hers and his, when they were first married, brought tears into her eyes. How wise and experienced she was now!) And had she not Cyril? Compared to many women, she was indeed very fortunate.

The one visitation which had been specially hers was the disappearance of Sophia. And yet even that was not worse than the death outright of Sophia, was perhaps not so bad. For Sophia might return out of the darkness. The blow of Sophia's flight had seemed unique when it was fresh, and long afterwards; had seemed to separate the Baines family from all other families in a particular shame. But at the age of forty-three Constance had learnt that such events are not uncommon in families, and strange sequels to them not unknown. Thinking often of Sophia, she hoped wildly and frequently.

She looked at the clock; she had a little spasm of nervousness lest Cyril might fail to keep his word on that first day of their new regular life together. And at the instant he burst into the room, invading it like an armed force, having previously laid waste the shop in his passage.

"I'm not late, mother! I'm not late!" he cried proudly.

She smiled warmly, happy in him, drawing out of him balm and solace. He did not know that in that stout familiar body before him was a sensitive, trembling soul that clutched at him ecstatically as the one reality in the universe. He did not know that that evening meal, partaken of without hurry after school had released him to her, was to be the ceremonial sign of their intimate unity and their interdependence, a tender and delicious proof that they were "all in all to each other"; he saw only his tea, for which he was hungry—just as hungry as though his father were not scarcely yet cold in the grave.

But he saw obscurely that the occasion demanded something not quite ordinary, and so he exerted himself to be boyishly charming to his mother. She said to herself "how good he was." He felt at ease and confident in the future, because he detected beneath her customary judicial, impartial mask a dear desire to spoil him.

After tea, she regretfully left him, at his home-lessons, in order to go into the shop. The shop was the great unsolved question. What was she to do with the shop? Was she to continue the business or to sell it? With the fortunes of her father and her aunt, and the economies of twenty years, she had more than sufficient means. She was indeed rich, according to the standards of the Square; nay, wealthy! Therefore she was under no material compulsion to keep the shop. Moreover, to keep it would mean personal superintendence and the burden of responsibility, from which her calm lethargy shrank. On the other hand, to dispose of the business would mean the breaking of ties and leaving the premises; and from this also she shrank. Young Lawton, without being asked, had advised her to sell. But she did not want to sell. She wanted the impossible: that matters should proceed in the future as in the past, that Samuel's death should change nothing save in her heart.

In the meantime Miss Insull was priceless. Constance thoroughly understood one side of the shop; but Miss Insull understood both, and the finance of it also. Miss Insull could have directed the establishment with credit, if not with brilliance. She was indeed directing it at that moment. Constance, however, felt jealous of Miss Insull; she was conscious of a slight antipathy towards the faithful one. She did not care to be in the hands of Miss Insull.

There were one or two customers at the millinery counter. They greeted her with a deplorable copiousness of tact. Most tactfully they avoided any reference to Constance's loss; but by their tone, their glances, at Constance and at each other, and their heroically restrained sighs, they spread desolation as though they had been spreading ashes instead of butter on bread. The assistants, too, had a special demeanour for the poor lone widow which was excessively trying to her. She wished to be natural, and she would have succeeded, had they not all of them apparently conspired together to make her task impossible.

She moved away to the other side of the shop, to Samuel's desk, at which he used to stand, staring absently out of the little window into King Street while murmurously casting figures. She lighted the gas-jet there, arranged the light exactly to suit her, and then lifted the large flap of the desk and drew forth some account books.

"Miss Insull!" she called, in a low, clear voice, with a touch of haughtiness and a touch of command in it. The pose, a comical contradiction of Constance's benevolent character, was deliberately adopted; it illustrated the effects of jealousy on even the softest disposition.

Miss Insull responded. She had no alternative but to respond. And she gave no sign of resenting her employer's attitude. But then Miss Insull seldom did give any sign of being human.

The customers departed, one after another, obsequiously sped by the assistants, who thereupon lowered the gases somewhat, according to saecular rule; and in the dim eclipse, as they restored boxes to shelves, they could hear the tranquil, regular, half-whispered conversation of the two women at the desk, discussing accounts; and then the chink of gold.

Suddenly there was an irruption. One of the assistants sprang instinctively to the gas; but on perceiving that the disturber of peace was only a slatternly girl, hatless and imperfectly clean, she decided to leave the gas as it was, and put on a condescending, suspicious demeanour.

"If you please, can I speak to the missis?" said the girl, breathlessly.

She seemed to be about eighteen years of age, fat and plain. Her blue frock was torn, and over it she wore a rough brown apron, caught up at one corner to the waist. Her bare forearms were of brick-red colour.

"What is it?" demanded the assistant.

Miss Insull looked over her shoulder across the shop. "It must be Maggie's—Mrs Hollins's daughter!" said Miss Insull under her breath.

"What can she want?" said Constance, leaving the desk instantly; and to the girl, who stood sturdily holding her own against the group of assistants, "You are Mrs Hollins's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes, mum."

"What's your name?"

"Maggie, mum. And, if you please, mother's sent me to ask if you'll kindly give her a funeral card."

"A funeral card?"

"Yes. Of Mr Povey. She's been expecting of one, and she thought as how perhaps you'd forgotten it, especially as she wasn't asked to the funeral."

The girl stopped.

Constance perceived that by mere negligence she had seriously wounded the feelings of Maggie, senior. The truth was, she had never thought of Maggie. She ought to have remembered that funeral cards were almost the sole ornamentation of Maggie's abominable cottage.

"Certainly," she replied after a pause. "Miss Insull, there are a few cards left in the desk, aren't there? Please put me one in an envelope for Mrs Hollins."

She gave the heavily bordered envelope to the ruddy wench, who enfolded it in her apron, and with hurried, shy thanks ran off.

"Tell your mother I send her a card with pleasure," Constance called after the girl.

The strangeness of the hazards of life made her thoughtful. She, to whom Maggie had always seemed an old woman, was a widow, but Maggie's husband survived as a lusty invalid. And she guessed that Maggie, vilely struggling in squalor and poverty, was somehow happy in her frowsy, careless way.

She went back to the accounts, dreaming.

II

When the shop had been closed, under her own critical and precise superintendence, she extinguished the last gas in it and returned to the parlour, wondering where she might discover some entirely reliable man or boy to deal with the shutters night and morning. Samuel had ordinarily dealt with the shutters himself, and on extraordinary occasions and during holidays Miss Insull and one of her subordinates had struggled with their unwieldiness. But the extraordinary occasion had now become ordinary, and Miss Insull could not be expected to continue indefinitely in the functions of a male. Constance had a mind to engage an errand-boy, a luxury against which Samuel had always set his face. She did not dream of asking the herculean Cyril to open and shut the shop.

He had apparently finished his home-lessons. The books were pushed aside, and he was sketching in lead-pencil on a drawing-block. To the right of the fireplace, over the sofa, there hung an engraving after Landseer, showing a lonely stag paddling into a lake. The stag at eve had drunk or was about to drink his fill, and Cyril was copying him. He had already indicated a flight of birds in the middle distance; vague birds on the wing being easier than detailed stags, he had begun with the birds.

Constance put a hand on his shoulder. "Finished your lessons?" she murmured caressingly.

Before speaking, Cyril gazed up at the picture with a frowning, busy expression, and then replied in an absent-minded voice:

"Yes." And after a pause: "Except my arithmetic. I shall do that in the morning before breakfast."

"Oh, Cyril!" she protested.

It had been a positive ordinance, for a long time past, that there should be no sketching until lessons were done. In his father's lifetime Cyril had never dared to break it.

He bent over his block, feigning an intense absorption. Constance's hand slipped from his shoulder. She wanted to command him formally to resume his lessons. But she could not. She feared an argument; she mistrusted herself. And, moreover, it was so soon after his father's death!

"You know you won't have time tomorrow morning!" she said weakly.

"Oh, mother!" he retorted superiorly. "Don't worry." And then, in a cajoling tone: "I've wanted to do that

stag for ages."

She sighed and sat down in her rocking-chair. He went on sketching, rubbing out, and making queer expostulatory noises against his pencil, or against the difficulties needlessly invented by Sir Edwin Landseer. Once he rose and changed the position of the gas-bracket, staring fiercely at the engraving as though it had committed a sin.

Amy came to lay the supper. He did not acknowledge that she existed.

"Now, Master Cyril, after you with that table, if you please!" She announced herself brusquely, with the privilege of an old servant and a woman who would never see thirty again.

"What a nuisance you are, Amy!" he gruffly answered. "Look here, mother, can't Amy lay the cloth on that half of the table? I'm right in the middle of my drawing. There's plenty of room there for two."

He seemed not to be aware that, in the phrase "plenty of room for two," he had made a callous reference to their loss. The fact was, there *was* plenty of room for two.

Constance said quickly: "Very well, Amy. For this once."

Amy grunted, but obeyed.

Constance had to summon him twice from art to nourishment. He ate with rapidity, frequently regarding the picture with half-shut, searching eyes. When he had finished, he refilled his glass with water, and put it next to his sketching-block.

"You surely aren't thinking of beginning to paint at this time of night!" Constance exclaimed, astonished.

"Oh *yes,* mother!" he fretfully appealed. "It's not late."

Another positive ordinance of his father's had been that there should be nothing after supper except bed. Nine o'clock was the latest permissible moment for going to bed. It was now less than a quarter to.

"It only wants twelve minutes to nine," Constance pointed out.

"Well, what if it does?"

"Now, Cyril," she said, "I do hope you are going to be a good boy, and not cause your mother anxiety."

But she said it too kindly.

He said sullenly: "I do think you might let me finish it. I've begun it. It won't take me long."

She made the mistake of leaving the main point. "How can you possibly choose your colours properly by gas-light?" she said.

"I'm going to do it in sepia," he replied in triumph.

"It mustn't occur again," she said.

He thanked God for a good supper, and sprang to the harmonium, where his paint-box was. Amy cleared away. Constance did crochet-work. There was silence. The clock struck nine, and it also struck half-past nine. She warned him repeatedly. At ten minutes to ten she said persuasively:

"Now, Cyril, when the clock strikes ten I shall really put the gas out."

The clock struck ten.

"Half a mo, half a mo!" he cried. "I've done! I've done!"

Her hand was arrested.

Another four minutes elapsed, and then he jumped up. "There you are!" he said proudly, showing her the block. And all his gestures were full of grace and cajolery.

"Yes, it's very good," Constance said, rather indifferently.

"I don't believe you care for it!" he accused her, but with a bright smile.

"I care for your health," she said. "Just look at that clock!"

He sat down in the other rocking-chair, deliberately.

"Now, Cyril!"

"Well, mother, I suppose you'll let me take my boots off!" He said it with teasing good-humour.

When he kissed her good night, she wanted to cling to him, so affectionate was his kiss; but she could not throw off the habits of restraint which she had been originally taught and had all her life practised. She keenly regretted the inability.

In her bedroom, alone, she listened to his movements as he undressed. The door between the two rooms was unlatched. She had to control a desire to open it ever so little and peep at him. He would not have liked that. He could have enriched her heart beyond all hope, and at no cost to himself; but he did not know his power. As she could not cling to him with her hands, she clung to him with that heart of hers, while moving sedately up and down the room, alone. And her eyes saw him through the solid wood of the door. At last she got heavily into bed. She thought with placid anxiety, in the dark: "I shall have to be firm with Cyril." And she thought also, simultaneously: "He really must be a good boy. He *must*." And clung to him passionately, without shame! Lying alone there in the dark, she could be as unrestrained and girlish as her heart chose. When she loosed her hold she instantly saw the boy's father arranged in his coffin, or flitting about the room. Then she would hug that vision too, for the pleasure of the pain it gave her.

III

She was reassured as to Cyril during the next few days. He did not attempt to repeat his ingenious

naughtiness of the Monday evening, and he came directly home for tea; moreover he had, as a kind of miracle performed to dazzle her, actually risen early on the Tuesday morning and done his arithmetic. To express her satisfaction she had manufactured a specially elaborate straw-frame for the sketch after Sir Edwin Landseer, and had hung it in her bedroom: an honour which Cyril appreciated. She was as happy as a woman suffering from a recent amputation can be: and compared with the long nightmare created by Samuel's monomania and illness, her existence seemed to be now a beneficent calm.

Cyril, she thought, had realized the importance in her eyes of tea, of that evening hour and that companionship which were for her the flowering of the day. And she had such confidence in his goodness that she would pour the boiling water on the Horniman tea-leaves even before he arrived: certainty could not be more sure. And then, on the Friday of the first week, he was late! He bounded in, after dark, and the state of his clothes indicated too clearly that he had been playing football in the mud that was a grassy field in summer.

"Have you been kept in, my boy?" she asked, for the sake of form.

"No, mother," he said casually. "We were just kicking the ball about a bit. Am I late?"

"Better go and tidy yourself," she said, not replying to his question. "You can't sit down in that state. And I'll have some fresh tea made. This is spoilt."

"Oh, very well!"

Her sacred tea—the institution which she wanted to hallow by long habit, and which was to count before everything with both of them—had been carelessly sacrificed to the kicking of a football in mud! And his father buried not ten days! She was wounded: a deep, clean, dangerous wound that would not bleed. She tried to be glad that he had not lied; he might easily have lied, saying that he had been detained for a fault and could not help being late. No! He was not given to lying; he would lie, like any human being, when a great occasion demanded such prudence, but he was not a liar; he might fairly be called a truthful boy. She tried to be glad, and did not succeed. She would have preferred him to have lied.

Amy, grumbling, had to boil more water.

When he returned to the parlour, superficially cleaned, Constance expected him to apologize in his roundabout boyish way; at any rate to woo and wheedle her, to show by some gesture that he was conscious of having put an affront on her. But his attitude was quite otherwise. His attitude was rather brusque and overbearing and noisy. He ate a very considerable amount of jam, far too quickly, and then asked for more, in a tone of a monarch who calls for his own. And ere tea was finished he said boldly, apropos of nothing:

"I say, mother, you'll just have to let me go to the School of Art after Easter."

And stared at her with a fixed challenge in his eyes.

He meant, by the School of Art, the evening classes at the School of Art. His father had decided absolutely against the project. His father had said that it would interfere with his lessons, would keep him up too late at night, and involve absence from home in the evening. The last had always been the real objection. His father had not been able to believe that Cyril's desire to study art sprang purely from his love of art; he could not avoid suspecting that it was a plan to obtain freedom in the evenings—that freedom which Samuel had invariably forbidden. In all Cyril's suggestions Samuel had been ready to detect the same scheme lurking. He had finally said that when Cyril left school and took to a vocation, then he could study art at night if he chose, but not before.

"You know what your father said!" Constance replied.

"But, mother! That's all very well! I'm sure father would have agreed. If I'm going to take up drawing I ought to do it at once. That's what the drawing-master says, and I suppose he ought to know." He finished on a tone of insolence.

"I can't allow you to do it yet," said Constance, quietly. "It's quite out of the question. Quite!"

He pouted and then he sulked. It was war between them.

At times he was the image of his Aunt Sophia. He would not leave the subject alone; but he would not listen to Constance's reasoning. He openly accused her of harshness. He asked her how she could expect him to get on if she thwarted him in his most earnest desires. He pointed to other boys whose parents were wiser.

"It's all very fine of you to put it on father!" he observed sarcastically.

He gave up his drawing entirely.

When she hinted that if he attended the School of Art she would be condemned to solitary evenings, he looked at her as though saying: "Well, and if you are—?" He seemed to have no heart.

After several weeks of intense unhappiness she said: "How many evenings do you want to go?"

The war was over.

He was charming again. When she was alone she could cling to him again. And she said to herself: "If we can be happy together only when I give way to him, I must give way to him." And there was ecstasy in her yielding. "After all," she said to herself, "perhaps it's very important that he should go to the School of Art." She solaced herself with such thoughts on three solitary evenings a week, waiting for him to come home.

CHAPTER VII

BRICKS AND MORTAR

I

In the summer of that year the occurrence of a white rash of posters on hoardings and on certain houses and shops, was symptomatic of organic change in the town. The posters were iterations of a mysterious announcement and summons, which began with the august words: “By Order of the Trustees of the late William Clews Mericarp, Esq.” Mericarp had been a considerable owner of property in Bursley. After a prolonged residence at Southport, he had died, at the age of eighty-two, leaving his property behind. For sixty years he had been a name, not a figure; and the news of his death, which was assuredly an event, incited the burgesses to gossip, for they had come to regard him as one of the invisible immortals. Constance was shocked, though she had never seen Mericarp. (“Everybody dies nowadays!” she thought.) He owned the Baines-Povey shop, and also Mr Critchlow’s shop. Constance knew not how often her father and, later, her husband, had renewed the lease of those premises that were now hers; but from her earliest recollections rose a vague memory of her father talking to her mother about “Mericarp’s rent,” which was and always had been a hundred a year. Mericarp had earned the reputation of being “a good landlord.” Constance said sadly: “We shall never have another as good!” When a lawyer’s clerk called and asked her to permit the exhibition of a poster in each of her shop-windows, she had misgivings for the future; she was worried; she decided that she would determine the lease next year, so as to be on the safe side; but immediately afterwards she decided that she could decide nothing.

The posters continued: “To be sold by auction at the Tiger Hotel at six-thirty for seven o’clock precisely.” What six-thirty had to do with seven o’clock precisely no one knew. Then, after stating the name and credentials of the auctioneer, the posters at length arrived at the objects to be sold: “All those freehold messuages and shops and copyhold tenements namely.” Houses were never sold by auction in Bursley. At moments of auction burgesses were reminded that the erections they lived in were not houses, as they had falsely supposed, but messuages. Having got as far as “namely” the posters ruled a line and began afresh: “Lot 1. All that extensive and commodious shop and messuage with the offices and appurtenances thereto belonging situate and being No. 4 St Luke’s Square in the parish of Bursley in the County of Stafford and at present in the occupation of Mrs Constance Povey widow under a lease expiring in September 1889.” Thus clearly asserting that all Constance’s shop was for sale, its whole entirety, and not a fraction or slice of it merely, the posters proceeded: “Lot 2. All that extensive and commodious shop and messuage with the offices and appurtenances thereto belonging situate and being No. 3 St Luke’s Square in the parish of Bursley in the County of Stafford and at present in the occupation of Charles Critchlow chemist under an agreement for a yearly tenancy.” The catalogue ran to fourteen lots. The posters, lest anyone should foolishly imagine that a non-legal intellect could have achieved such explicit and comprehensive clarity of statement, were signed by a powerful firm of solicitors in Hanbridge. Happily in the Five Towns there were no metaphysicians; otherwise the firm might have been expected to explain, in the “further particulars and conditions” which the posters promised, how even a messuage could “be” the thing at which it was “situate.”

Within a few hours of the outbreak of the rash, Mr Critchlow abruptly presented himself before Constance at the millinery counter; he was waving a poster.

“Well!” he exclaimed grimly. “What next, eh?”

“Yes, indeed!” Constance responded.

“Are ye thinking o’ buying?” he asked. All the assistants, including Miss Insull, were in hearing, but he ignored their presence.

“Buying!” repeated Constance. “Not me! I’ve got quite enough house property as it is.”

Like all owners of real property, she usually adopted towards her possessions an attitude implying that she would be willing to pay somebody to take them from her.

“Shall *you*?” she added, with Mr Critchlow’s own brusqueness.

“Me! Buy property in St Luke’s Square!” Mr Critchlow sneered. And then left the shop as suddenly as he had entered it.

The sneer at St Luke’s Square was his characteristic expression of an opinion which had been slowly forming for some years. The Square was no longer what it had been, though individual business might be as good as ever. For nearly twelve months two shops had been to let in it. And once, bankruptcy had stained its

annals. The tradesmen had naturally searched for a cause in every direction save the right one, the obvious one; and naturally they had found a cause. According to the tradesmen, the cause was “this football.” The Bursley Football Club had recently swollen into a genuine rival of the ancient supremacy of the celebrated Knype Club. It had transformed itself into a limited company, and rented a ground up the Moorthorne Road, and built a grand stand. The Bursley F.C. had “tied” with the Knype F.C. on the Knype ground—a prodigious achievement, an achievement which occupied a column of the *Athletic News* one Monday morning! But were the tradesmen civically proud of this glory? No! They said that “this football” drew people out of the town on Saturday afternoons, to the complete abolition of shopping. They said also that people thought of nothing but “this football”; and, nearly in the same breath, that only roughs and good-for-nothings could possibly be interested in such a barbarous game. And they spoke of gate-money, gambling, and professionalism, and the end of all true sport in England. In brief, something new had come to the front and was submitting to the ordeal of the curse.

The sale of the Mericarp estate had a particular interest for respectable stake-in-the-town persons. It would indicate to what extent, if at all, “this football” was ruining Bursley.

Constance mentioned to Cyril that she fancied she might like to go to the sale, and as it was dated for one of Cyril’s off-nights Cyril said that he fancied he might like to go too. So they went together; Samuel used to attend property sales, but he had never taken his wife to one. Constance and Cyril arrived at the Tiger shortly after seven o’clock, and were directed to a room furnished and arranged as for a small public meeting of philanthropists. A few gentlemen were already present, but not the instigating trustees, solicitors, and auctioneers. It appeared that “six-thirty for seven o’clock precisely” meant seven-fifteen. Constance took a Windsor chair in the corner nearest the door, and motioned Cyril to the next chair; they dared not speak; they moved on tiptoe; Cyril inadvertently dragged his chair along the floor, and produced a scrunching sound; be blushed, as though he had desecrated a church, and his mother made a gesture of horror. The remainder of the company glanced at the corner, apparently pained by this negligence. Some of them greeted Constance, but self-consciously, with a sort of shamed air; it might have been that they had all nefariously gathered together there for the committing of a crime. Fortunately Constance’s widowhood had already lost its touching novelty, so that the greetings, if self-conscious, were at any rate given without unendurable commiseration and did not cause awkwardness.

When the official world arrived, fussy, bustling, bearing documents and a hammer, the general feeling of guilty shame was intensified. Useless for the auctioneer to try to dissipate the gloom by means of bright gestures and quick, cheerful remarks to his supporters! Cyril had an idea that the meeting would open with a hymn, until the apparition of a tapster with wine showed him his error. The auctioneer very particularly enjoined the tapster to see to it that no one lacked for his thirst, and the tapster became self-consciously energetic. He began by choosing Constance for service. In refusing wine, she blushed; then the fellow offered a glass to Cyril, who went scarlet, and mumbled “No” with a lump in his throat; when the tapster’s back was turned, he smiled sheepishly at his mother. The majority of the company accepted and sipped. The auctioneer sipped and loudly smacked, and said: “Ah!”

Mr Critchlow came in.

And the auctioneer said again: “Ah! I’m always glad when the tenants come. That’s always a good sign.”

He glanced round for approval of this sentiment. But everybody seemed too stiff to move. Even the auctioneer was self-conscious.

“Waiter! Offer wine to Mr Critchlow!” he exclaimed bullyingly, as if saying: “Man! what on earth are you thinking of to neglect Mr Critchlow?”

“Yes, sir; yes, sir,” said the waiter, who was dispensing wine as fast as a waiter can.

The auction commenced.

Seizing the hammer, the auctioneer gave a short biography of William Clews Mericarp, and, this pious duty accomplished, called upon a solicitor to read the conditions of sale. The solicitor complied and made a distressing exhibition of self-consciousness. The conditions of sale were very lengthy, and apparently composed in a foreign tongue; and the audience listened to this elocution with a stoical pretence of breathless interest.

Then the auctioneer put up all that extensive and commodious messuage and shop situate and being No. 4 St Luke’s Square. Constance and Cyril moved their limbs surreptitiously, as though being at last found out. The auctioneer referred to John Baines and to Samuel Povey, with a sense of personal loss, and then expressed his pleasure in the presence of “the ladies”; he meant Constance, who once more had to blush.

“Now, gentlemen,” said the auctioneer, “what do you say for these famous premises? I think I do not exaggerate when I use the word ‘famous.’”

Someone said a thousand pounds, in the terrorized voice of a delinquent.

“A thousand pounds,” repeated the auctioneer, paused, sipped, and smacked.

“Guineas,” said another voice self-accused of iniquity.

“A thousand and fifty,” said the auctioneer.

Then there was a long interval, an interval that tightened the nerves of the assembly.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen,” the auctioneer adjured.

The first voice said sulkily: “Eleven hundred.”

And thus the bids rose to fifteen hundred, lifted bit by bit, as it were, by the magnetic force of the auctioneer’s personality. The man was now standing up, in domination. He bent down to the solicitor’s head; they whispered together.

“Gentlemen,” said the auctioneer, “I am happy to inform you that the sale is now open.” His tone translated better than words his calm professional beatitude. Suddenly in a voice of wrath he hissed at the waiter: “Waiter, why don’t you serve these gentlemen?”

“Yes, sir; yes, sir.”

The auctioneer sat down and sipped at leisure, chatting with his clerk and the solicitor and the solicitor’s clerk.

When he rose it was as a conqueror. “Gentlemen, fifteen hundred is bid. Now, Mr Critchlow.”

Mr Critchlow shook his head. The auctioneer threw a courteous glance at Constance, who avoided it.

After many adjurations, he reluctantly raised his hammer, pretended to let it fall, and saved it several times.

And then Mr Critchlow said: “And fifty.”

“Fifteen hundred and fifty is bid,” the auctioneer informed the company, electrifying the waiter once more. And when he had sipped he said, with feigned sadness: “Come, gentlemen, you surely don’t mean to let this magnificent Lot go for fifteen hundred and fifty pounds?”

But they did mean that.

The hammer fell, and the auctioneer’s clerk and the solicitor’s clerk took Mr Critchlow aside and wrote with him.

Nobody was surprised when Mr Critchlow bought Lot No. 2, his own shop.

Constance whispered then to Cyril that she wished to leave. They left, with unnatural precautions, but instantly regained their natural demeanour in the dark street.

“Well, I never! Well, I never!” she murmured outside, astonished and disturbed.

She hated the prospect of Mr Critchlow as a landlord. And yet she could not persuade herself to leave the place, in spite of decisions.

The sale demonstrated that football had not entirely undermined the commercial basis of society in Bursley; only two Lots had to be withdrawn.

II

On Thursday afternoon of the same week the youth whom Constance had ended by hiring for the manipulation of shutters and other jobs unsuitable for fragile women, was closing the shop. The clock had struck two. All the shutters were up except the last one, in the midst of the doorway. Miss Insull and her mistress were walking about the darkened interior, putting dust-sheets well over the edges of exposed goods; the other assistants had just left. The bull-terrier had wandered into the shop as he almost invariably did at closing time—for he slept there, an efficient guard—and had lain down by the dying stove; though not venerable, he was stiffening into age.

“You can shut,” said Miss Insull to the youth.

But as the final shutter was ascending to its position, Mr Critchlow appeared on the pavement.

“Hold on, young fellow!” Mr Critchlow commanded, and stepped slowly, lifting up his long apron, over the horizontal shutter on which the perpendicular shutters rested in the doorway.

“Shall you be long, Mr Critchlow?” the youth asked, posing the shutter. “Or am I to shut?”

“Shut, lad,” said Mr Critchlow, briefly. “I’ll go out by th’ side door.”

“Here’s Mr Critchlow!” Miss Insull called out to Constance, in a peculiar tone. And a flush, scarcely perceptible, crept very slowly over her dark features. In the twilight of the shop, lit only by a few starry holes in the shutters, and by the small side-window, not the keenest eye could have detected that flush.

“Mr Critchlow!” Constance murmured the exclamation. She resented his future ownership of her shop. She thought he was come to play the landlord, and she determined to let him see that her mood was independent and free, that she would as lief give up the business as keep it. In particular she meant to accuse him of having deliberately deceived her as to his intentions on his previous visit.

“Well, missis!” the aged man greeted her. “We’ve made it up between us. Happen some folk’ll think we’ve taken our time, but I don’t know as that’s their affair.”

His little blinking eyes had a red border. The skin of his pale small face was wrinkled in millions of minute creases. His arms and legs were marvellously thin and sharply angular. The corners of his heliotrope lips were turned down, as usual, in a mysterious comment on the world; and his smile, as he fronted Constance with his excessive height, crowned the mystery.

Constance stared, at a loss. It surely could not after all be true, the substance of the rumours that had floated like vapours in the Square for eight years and more!

“What . . . ?” she began.

“Me, and her!” He jerked his head in the direction of Miss Insull.

The dog had leisurely strolled forward to inspect the edges of the *fiancé*’s trousers. Miss Insull summoned

the animal with a noise of fingers, and then bent down and caressed it. A strange gesture proving the validity of Charles Critchlow's discovery that in Maria Insull a human being was buried!

Miss Insull was, as near as anyone could guess, forty years of age. For twenty-five years she had served in the shop, passing about twelve hours a day in the shop; attending regularly at least three religious services at the Wesleyan Chapel or School on Sundays, and sleeping with her mother, whom she kept. She had never earned more than thirty shillings a week, and yet her situation was considered to be exceptionally good. In the eternal fusty dusk of the shop she had gradually lost such sexual characteristics and charms as she had once possessed. She was as thin and flat as Charles Critchlow himself. It was as though her bosom had suffered from a prolonged drought at a susceptible period of development, and had never recovered. The one proof that blood ran in her veins was the pimply quality of her ruined complexion, and the pimples of that brickish expanse proved that the blood was thin and bad. Her hands and feet were large and ungainly; the skin of the fingers was roughened by coarse contacts to the texture of emery-paper. On six days a week she wore black; on the seventh a kind of discreet half-mourning. She was honest, capable, and industrious; and beyond the confines of her occupation she had no curiosity, no intelligence, no ideas. Superstitions and prejudices, deep and violent, served her for ideas; but she could incomparably sell silks and bonnets, braces and oilcloth; in widths, lengths, and prices she never erred; she never annoyed a customer, nor foolishly promised what could not be performed, nor was late or negligent, or disrespectful. No one knew anything about her, because there was nothing to know. Subtract the shop-assistant from her, and naught remained. Benighted and spiritually dead, she existed by habit.

But for Charles Critchlow she happened to be an illusion. He had cast eyes on her and had seen youth, innocence, virginity. During eight years the moth Charles had flitted round the lamp of her brilliance, and was now singed past escape. He might treat her with what casualness he chose; he might ignore her in public; he might talk brutally about women; he might leave her to wonder dully what he meant, for months at a stretch: but there emerged indisputable from the sum of his conduct the fact that he wanted her. He desired her; she charmed him; she was something ornamental and luxurious for which he was ready to pay—and to commit follies. He had been a widower since before she was born; to him she was a slip of a girl. All is relative in this world. As for her, she was too indifferent to refuse him. Why refuse him? Oysters do not refuse.

"I'm sure I congratulate you both," Constance breathed, realizing the import of Mr Critchlow's laconic words. "I'm sure I hope you'll be happy."

"That'll be all right," said Mr Critchlow.

"Thank you, Mrs Povey," said Maria Insull.

Nobody seemed to know what to say next. "It's rather sudden," was on Constance's tongue, but did not achieve utterance, being patently absurd.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr Critchlow, as though himself contemplating anew the situation.

Miss Insull gave the dog a final pat.

"So that's settled," said Mr Critchlow. "Now, missis, ye want to give up this shop, don't ye?"

"I'm not so sure about that," Constance answered uneasily.

"Don't tell me!" he protested. "Of course ye want to give up the shop."

"I've lived here all my life," said Constance.

"Ye've not lived in th' shop all your life. I said th' shop. Listen here!" he continued. "I've got a proposal to make to you. You can keep the house, and I'll take the shop off your hands. Now?" He looked at her inquiringly.

Constance was taken aback by the brusqueness of the suggestion, which, moreover, she did not understand.

"But how—" she faltered.

"Come here," said Mr Critchlow, impatiently, and he moved towards the house-door of the shop, behind the till.

"Come where? What do you want?" Constance demanded in a maze.

"Here!" said Mr Critchlow, with increasing impatience. "Follow me, will ye?"

Constance obeyed. Miss Insull sidled after Constance, and the dog after Miss Insull. Mr Critchlow went through the doorway and down the corridor, past the cutting-out room to his right. The corridor then turned at a right-angle to the left and ended at the parlour door, the kitchen steps being to the left.

Mr Critchlow stopped short of the kitchen steps, and extended his arms, touching the walls on either side.

"Here!" he said, tapping the walls with his bony knuckles. "Here! Suppose I brick ye this up, and th' same upstairs between th' showroom and th' bedroom passage, ye've got your house to yourself. Ye say ye've lived here all your life. Well, what's to prevent ye finishing up here? The fact is," he added, "it would only be making into two houses again what was two houses to start with, afore your time, missis."

"And what about the shop?" cried Constance.

"Ye can sell us th' stock at a valuation."

Constance suddenly comprehended the scheme. Mr Critchlow would remain the chemist, while Mrs Critchlow became the head of the chief drapery business in the town. Doubtless they would knock a hole through the separating wall on the other side, to balance the bricking-up on this side. They must have thought it all out in detail. Constance revolted.

"Yes!" she said, a little disdainfully. "And my goodwill? Shall you take that at a valuation too?"

Mr Critchlow glanced at the creature for whom he was ready to scatter thousands of pounds. She might have been a Phryne and he the infatuated fool. He glanced at her as if to say: "We expected this, and this is where we agreed it was to stop."

"Ay!" he said to Constance. "Show me your goodwill. Lap it up in a bit of paper and hand it over, and I'll take it at a valuation. But not afore, missis! Not afore! I'm making ye a very good offer. Twenty pound a year, I'll let ye th' house for. And take th' stock at a valuation. Think it over, my lass."

Having said what he had to say, Charles Critchlow departed according to his custom. He unceremoniously let himself out by the side door, and passed with wavy apron round the corner of King Street into the Square and so to his own shop, which ignored the Thursday half-holiday. Miss Insull left soon afterwards.

III

Constance's pride urged her to refuse the offer. But in truth her sole objection to it was that she had not thought of the scheme herself. For the scheme really reconciled her wish to remain where she was with her wish to be free of the shop.

"I shall make him put me in a new window in the parlour—one that will open!" she said positively to Cyril, who accepted Mr Critchlow's idea with fatalistic indifference.

After stipulating for the new window, she closed with the offer. Then there was the stock-taking, which endured for weeks. And then the carpenter came and measured for the window. And a builder and a mason came and inspected doorways, and Constance felt that the end was upon her. She took up the carpet in the parlour and protected the furniture by dust-sheets. She and Cyril lived between bare boards and dust-sheets for twenty days, and neither carpenter nor mason reappeared. Then one surprising day the old window was removed by the carpenter's two journeymen, and late in the afternoon the carpenter brought the new window, and the three men worked till ten o'clock at night, fixing it. Cyril wore his cap and went to bed in his cap, and Constance wore a Paisley shawl. A painter had bound himself beyond all possibility of failure to paint the window on the morrow. He was to begin at six A.M., and Amy's alarm-clock was altered so that she might be up and dressed to admit him. He came a week later, administered one coat, and vanished for another ten days.

Then two masons suddenly came with heavy tools, and were shocked to find that all was not prepared for them. (After three carpetless weeks Constance had relaid her floors.) They tore off wall-paper, sent cascades of plaster down the kitchen steps, withdrew alternate courses of bricks from the walls, and, sated with destruction, hastened away. After four days new red bricks began to arrive, carried by a quite guiltless hodman who had not visited the house before. The hodman met the full storm of Constance's wrath. It was not a vicious wrath, rather a good-humoured wrath; but it impressed the hodman. "My house hasn't been fit to live in for a month," she said in fine. "If these walls aren't built tomorrow, upstairs *and* down—tomorrow, mind!—don't let any of you dare to show your noses here again, for I won't have you. Now you've brought your bricks. Off with you, and tell your master what I say!"

It was effective. The next day subdued and plausible workmen of all sorts awoke the house with knocking at six-thirty precisely, and the two doorways were slowly bricked up. The curious thing was that, when the barrier was already a foot high on the ground floor Constance remembered small possessions of her own which she had omitted to remove from the cutting-out room. Picking up her skirts, she stepped over into the region that was no more hers, and stepped back with the goods. She had a bandanna round her head to keep the thick dust out of her hair. She was very busy, very preoccupied with nothings. She had no time for sentimentalities. Yet when the men arrived at the topmost course and were at last hidden behind their own erection, and she could see only rough bricks and mortar, she was disconcertingly overtaken by a misty blindness and could not even see bricks and mortar. Cyril found her, with her absurd bandanna, weeping in a sheet-covered rocking-chair in the sacked parlour. He whistled uneasily, remarked: "I say, mother, what about tea?" and then, hearing the heavy voices of workmen above, ran with relief upstairs. Tea had been set in the drawing-room, he was glad to learn that from Amy, who informed him also that she should "never get used to them there new walls," not as long as she lived.

He went to the School of Art that night. Constance, alone, could find nothing to do. She had willed that the walls should be built, and they had been built; but days must elapse before they could be plastered, and after the plaster still more days before the papering. Not for another month, perhaps, would her house be free of workmen and ripe for her own labours. She could only sit in the dust-drifts and contemplate the havoc of change, and keep her eyes as dry as she could. The legal transactions were all but complete; little bills announcing the transfer of the business lay on the counters in the shop at the disposal of customers. In two days Charles Critchlow would pay the price of a desire realized. The sign was painted out and new letters sketched thereon in chalk. In future she would be Compelled, if she wished to enter the shop, to enter it as a customer and from the front. Yes, she saw that, though the house remained hers, the root of her life had been wrenched up.

And the mess! It seemed inconceivable that the material mess could ever be straightened away!

Yet, ere the fields of the county were first covered with snow that season, only one sign survived of the devastating revolution, and that was a loose sheet of wall-paper that had been too soon pasted on the new plaster and would not stick. Maria Insull was Maria Critchlow. Constance had been out into the Square and seen the altered sign, and seen Mrs Critchlow's taste in window-curtains, and seen—most impressive sight of all—that the grimy window of the abandoned room at the top of the abandoned staircase next to the bedroom of her girlhood had been cleaned and a table put in front of it. She knew that the chamber, which she herself had never entered, was to be employed as a storeroom, but the visible proof of its conversion so strangely affected her that she had not felt able to go boldly into the shop, as she had meant to do, and make a few purchases in the way of friendliness. "I'm a silly woman!" she muttered. Later, she did venture, timidly abrupt, into the shop, and was received with fitting state by Mrs Critchlow (as desiccated as ever), who insisted on allowing her the special trade discount. And she carried her little friendly purchases round to her own door in King Street. Trivial, trivial event! Constance, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, did both. She accused herself of developing a hysterical faculty in tears, and strove sagely against it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PROUDEST MOTHER

I

In the year 1893 there was a new and strange man living at No. 4, St Luke's Square. Many people remarked on the phenomenon. Very few of his like had ever been seen in Bursley before. One of the striking things about him was the complex way in which he secured himself by means of glittering chains. A chain stretched across his waistcoat, passing through a special button-hole, without a button, in the middle. To this cable were firmly linked a watch at one end and a pencil-case at the other; the chain also served as a protection against a thief who might attempt to snatch the fancy waistcoat entire. Then there were longer chains, beneath the waistcoat, partly designed, no doubt, to deflect bullets, but serving mainly to enable the owner to haul up penknives, cigarette-cases, match-boxes, and key-rings from the profundities of hip-pockets. An essential portion of the man's braces, visible sometimes when he played at tennis, consisted of chain, and the upper and nether halves of his cuff-links were connected by chains. Occasionally he was to be seen chained to a dog.

A reversion, conceivably, to a medieval type! Yes, but also the exemplar of the excessively modern! Externally he was a consequence of the fact that, years previously, the leading tailor in Bursley had permitted his son to be apprenticed in London. The father died; the son had the wit to return and make a fortune while creating a new type in the town, a type of which multiple chains were but one feature, and that the least expensive if the most salient. For instance, up to the historic year in which the young tailor created the type, any cap was a cap in Bursley, and any collar was a collar. But thenceforward no cap was a cap, and no collar was a collar, which did not exactly conform in shape and material to certain sacred caps and collars guarded by the young tailor in his back shop. None knew why these sacred caps and collars were sacred, but they were; their sacredness endured for about six months, and then suddenly—again none knew why—they fell from their estate and became lower than offal for dogs, and were supplanted on the altar. The type brought into existence by the young tailor was to be recognized by its caps and collars, and in a similar manner by every other article of attire, except its boots. Unfortunately the tailor did not sell boots, and so imposed on his creatures no mystical creed as to boots. This was a pity, for the boot-makers of the town happened not to be inflamed by the type-creating passion as the tailor was, and thus the new type finished abruptly at the edges of the tailor's trousers.

The man at No. 4, St Luke's Square had comparatively small and narrow feet, which gave him an advantage; and as he was endowed with a certain vague general physical distinction he managed, despite the eternal untidiness of his hair, to be eminent among the type. Assuredly the frequent sight of him in her house flattered the pride of Constance's eye, which rested on him almost always with pleasure. He had come into

the house with startling abruptness soon after Cyril left school and was indentured to the head designer at "Peel's," that classic earthenware manufactory. The presence of a man in her abode disconcerted Constance at the beginning; but she soon grew accustomed to it, perceiving that a man would behave as a man, and must be expected to do so. This man, in truth, did what he liked in all things. Cyril having always been regarded by both his parents as enormous, one would have anticipated a giant in the new man; but, queerly, he was slim, and little above the average height. Neither in enormity nor in many other particulars did he resemble the Cyril whom he had supplanted. His gestures were lighter and quicker; he had nothing of Cyril's ungainliness; he had not Cyril's limitless taste for sweets, nor Cyril's terrific hatred of gloves, barbers, and soap. He was much more dreamy than Cyril, and much busier. In fact, Constance only saw him at meal-times. He was at Peel's in the day and at the School of Art every night. He would dream during a meal, even; and, without actually saying so, he gave the impression that he was the busiest man in Bursley, wrapped in occupations and preoccupations as in a blanket—a blanket which Constance had difficulty in penetrating.

Constance wanted to please him; she lived for nothing but to please him; he was, however, exceedingly difficult to please, not in the least because he was hypercritical and exacting, but because he was indifferent. Constance, in order to satisfy her desire of pleasing, had to make fifty efforts, in the hope that he might chance to notice one. He was a good man, amazingly industrious—when once Constance had got him out of bed in the morning; with no vices; kind, save when Constance mistakenly tried to thwart him; charming, with a curious strain of humour that Constance only half understood. Constance was unquestionably vain about him, and she could honestly find in him little to blame. But whereas he was the whole of her universe, she was merely a dim figure in the background of his. Every now and then, with his gentle, elegant raillery, he would apparently rediscover her, as though saying: "Ah! You're still there, are you?" Constance could not meet him on the plane where his interests lay, and he never knew the passionate intensity of her absorption in that minor part of his life which moved on her plane. He never worried about her solitude, or guessed that in throwing her a smile and a word at supper he was paying her meagrely for three hours of lone rocking in a rocking-chair.

The worst of it was that she was quite incurable. No experience would suffice to cure her trick of continually expecting him to notice things which he never did notice. One day he said, in the midst of a silence: "By the way, didn't father leave any boxes of cigars?" She had the steps up into her bedroom and reached down from the dusty top of the wardrobe the box which she had put there after Samuel's funeral. In handing him the box she was doing a great deed. His age was nineteen, and she was ratifying his precocious habit of smoking by this solemn gift. He entirely ignored the box for several days. She said timidly: "Have you tried those cigars?" "Not yet," he replied. "I'll try 'em one of these days." Ten days later, on a Sunday when he chanced not to have gone out with his aristocratic friend Matthew Peel-Swynnerton, he did at length open the box and take out a cigar. "Now," he observed roguishly, cutting the cigar, "we shall see, Mrs Plover!" He often called her Mrs Plover, for fun. Though she liked him to be sufficiently interested in her to tease her, she did not like being called Mrs Plover, and she never failed to say: "I'm not Mrs Plover." He smoked the cigar slowly, in the rocking-chair, throwing his head back and sending clouds to the ceiling. And afterwards he remarked: "The old man's cigars weren't so bad." "Indeed!" she answered tartly, as if maternally resenting this easy patronage. But in secret she was delighted. There was something in her son's favourable verdict on her husband's cigars that thrilled her.

And she looked at him. Impossible to see in him any resemblance to his father! Oh! He was a far more brilliant, more advanced, more complicated, more seductive being than his homely father! She wondered where he had come from. And yet . . . ! If his father had lived, what would have occurred between them? Would the boy have been openly smoking cigars in the house at nineteen?

She laboriously interested herself, so far as he would allow, in his artistic studies and productions. A back attic on the second floor was now transformed into a studio—a naked apartment which smelt of oil and of damp clay. Often there were traces of clay on the stairs. For working in clay he demanded of his mother a smock, and she made a smock, on the model of a genuine smock which she obtained from a country-woman who sold eggs and butter in the Covered Market. Into the shoulders of the smock she put a week's fancy-stitching, taking the pattern from an old book of embroidery. One day when he had seen her stitching morn, noon, and afternoon, at the smock, he said, as she rocked idly after supper: "I suppose you haven't forgotten all about the smock I asked you for, have you, mater?" She knew that he was teasing her; but, while perfectly realizing how foolish she was, she nearly always acted as though his teasing was serious; she picked up the smock again from the sofa. When the smock was finished he examined it intently; then exclaimed with an air of surprise: "By Jove! That's beautiful! Where did you get this pattern?" He continued to stare at it, smiling in pleasure. He turned over the tattered leaves of the embroidery-book with the same naïve, charmed astonishment, and carried the book away to the studio. "I must show that to Swynnerton," he said. As for her, the epithet "beautiful" seemed a strange epithet to apply to a mere piece of honest stitchery done in a pattern, and a stitch with which she had been familiar all her life. The fact was she understood his "art" less and less. The sole wall decoration of his studio was a Japanese print, which struck her as being entirely preposterous, considered as a picture. She much preferred his own early drawings of moss-roses and picturesque castles—things that he now mercilessly condemned. Later, he discovered her cutting out another smock. "What's that

for?" he inquired. "Well," she said, "you can't manage with one smock. What shall you do when that one has to go to the wash?" "Wash!" he repeated vaguely. "There's no need for it to go to the wash." "Cyril," she replied, "don't try my patience! I was thinking of making you half a dozen." He whistled. "With all that stitching?" he questioned, amazed at the undertaking. "Why not?" she said. In her young days, no sempstress ever made fewer than half a dozen of anything, and it was usually a dozen; it was sometimes half a dozen. "Well," he murmured, "you have got a nerve! I'll say that"

Similar things happened whenever he showed that he was pleased. If he said of a dish, in the local tongue: "I could do a bit of that!" or if he simply smacked his lips over it, she would surfeit him with that dish.

II

On a hot day in August, just before they were to leave Bursley for a month in the Isle of Man, Cyril came home, pale and perspiring, and dropped on to the sofa. He wore a grey alpaca suit, and, except his hair, which in addition to being very untidy was damp with sweat, he was a masterpiece of slim elegance, despite the heat. He blew out great sighs, and rested his head on the antimacassared arm of the sofa.

"Well, mater," he said, in a voice of factitious calm, "I've got it." He was looking up at the ceiling.

"Got what?"

"The National Scholarship. Swynnerton says it's a sheer fluke. But I've got it. Great glory for the Bursley School of Art!"

"National Scholarship?" she said. "What's that? What is it?"

"Now, mother!" he admonished her, not without testiness. "Don't go and say I've never breathed a word about it!"

He lit a cigarette, to cover his self-consciousness, for he perceived that she was moved far beyond the ordinary.

Never, in fact, not even by the death of her husband, had she received such a frightful blow as that which the dreamy Cyril had just dealt her.

It was not a complete surprise, but it was nearly a complete surprise. A few months previously he certainly had mentioned, in his incidental way, the subject of a National Scholarship. Apropos of a drinking-cup which he had designed, he had said that the director of the School of Art had suggested that it was good enough to compete for the National, and that as he was otherwise qualified for the competition he might as well send the cup to South Kensington. He had added that Peel-Swynnerton had laughed at the notion as absurd. On that occasion she had comprehended that a National Scholarship involved residence in London. She ought to have begun to live in fear, for Cyril had a most disturbing habit of making a mere momentary reference to matters which he deemed very important and which occupied a large share of his attention. He was secretive by nature, and the rigidity of his father's rule had developed this trait in his character. But really he had spoken of the competition with such an extreme casualness that with little effort she had dismissed it from her anxieties as involving a contingency so remote as to be negligible. She had, genuinely, almost forgotten it. Only at rare intervals had it wakened in her a dull transitory pain—like the herald of a fatal malady. And, as a woman in the opening stage of disease, she had hastily reassured herself: "How silly of me! This can't possibly be anything serious!"

And now she was condemned. She knew it. She knew there could be no appeal. She knew that she might as usefully have besought mercy from a tiger as from her good, industrious, dreamy son.

"It means a pound a week," said Cyril, his self-consciousness intensified by her silence and by the dreadful look on her face. "And of course free tuition."

"For how long?" she managed to say.

"Well," said he, "that depends. Nominally for a year. But if you behave yourself it's always continued for three years."

If he stayed for three years he would never come back: that was a certainty.

How she rebelled, furious and despairing, against the fortuitous cruelty of things! She was sure that he had not, till then, thought seriously of going to London. But the fact that the Government would admit him free to its classrooms and give him a pound a week besides, somehow forced him to go to London. It was not the lack of means that would have prevented him from going. Why, then, should the presence of means induce him to go? There was no logical reason. The whole affair was disastrously absurd. The art master at the Wedgwood Institution had chanced, merely chanced, to suggest that the drinking-cup should be sent to South Kensington. And the result of this caprice was that she was sentenced to solitude for life! It was too monstrously, too incredibly wicked!

With what futile and bitter execration she murmured in her heart the word "If." If Cyril's childish predilections had not been encouraged! If he had only been content to follow his father's trade! If she had flatly refused to sign his indenture at Peel's and pay the premium! If he had not turned from colour to clay! If the art master had not had that fatal "idea"! If the judges for the competition had decided otherwise! If only she had brought Cyril up in habits of obedience, sacrificing temporary peace to permanent security!

For after all he could not abandon her without her consent. He was not of age. And he would want a lot

more money, which he could obtain from none but her. She could refuse . . . No! She could not refuse. He was the master, the tyrant. For the sake of daily pleasantness she had weakly yielded to him at the start! She had behaved badly to herself and to him. He was spoiled. She had spoiled him. And he was about to repay her with life-long misery, and nothing would deflect him from his course. The usual conduct of the spoilt child! Had she not witnessed it, and moralized upon it, in other families?

"You don't seem very chirpy over it, mater!" he said.

She went out of the room. His joy in the prospect of departure from the Five Towns, from her, though he masked it, was more manifest than she could bear.

The *Signal,* the next day, made a special item of the news. It appeared that no National Scholarship had been won in the Five Towns for eleven years. The citizens were exhorted to remember that Mr Povey had gained his success in open competition with the cleverest young students of the entire kingdom—and in a branch of art which he had but recently taken up; and further, that the Government offered only eight scholarships each year. The name of Cyril Povey passed from lip to lip. And nobody who met Constance, in street or shop, could refrain from informing her that she ought to be a proud mother, to have such a son, but that truly they were not surprised . . . and how proud his poor father would have been! A few sympathetically hinted that maternal pride was one of those luxuries that may cost too dear.

III

The holiday in the Isle of Man was of course ruined for her. She could scarcely walk because of the weight of a lump of lead that she carried in her bosom. On the brightest days the lump of lead was always there. Besides, she was so obese. In ordinary circumstances they might have stayed beyond the month. An indentured pupil is not strapped to the wheel like a common apprentice. Moreover, the indentures were to be cancelled. But Constance did not care to stay. She had to prepare for his departure to London. She had to lay the faggots for her own martyrdom.

In this business of preparation she showed as much silliness, she betrayed as perfect a lack of perspective, as the most superior son could desire for a topic of affectionate irony. Her preoccupation with petty things of no importance whatever was worthy of the finest traditions of fond motherhood. However, Cyril's careless satire had no effect on her, save that once she got angry, thereby startling him; he quite correctly and sagely laid this unprecedented outburst to the account of her wrought nerves, and forgave it. Happily for the smoothness of Cyril's translation to London, young Peel-Swynnerton was acquainted with the capital, had a brother in Chelsea, knew of reputable lodgings, was, indeed, an encyclopaedia of the town, and would himself spend a portion of the autumn there. Otherwise, the preliminaries which his mother would have insisted on by means of tears and hysteria might have proved fatiguing to Cyril.

The day came when on that day week Cyril would be gone. Constance steadily fabricated cheerfulness against the prospect. She said:

"Suppose I come with you?"

He smiled in toleration of this joke as being a passable quality of joke. And then she smiled in the same sense, hastening to agree with him that as a joke it was not a bad joke.

In the last week he was very loyal to his tailor. Many a young man would have commanded new clothes after, not before, his arrival in London. But Cyril had faith in his creator.

On the day of departure the household, the very house itself, was in a state of excitation. He was to leave early. He would not listen to the project of her accompanying him as far as Knype, where the Loop Line joined the main. She might go to Bursley Station and no further. When she rebelled he disclosed the merest hint of his sullen-churlish side, and she at once yielded. During breakfast she did not cry, but the aspect of her face made him protest.

"Now, look here, mater! Just try to remember that I shall be back for Christmas. It's barely three months." And he lit a cigarette.

She made no reply.

Amy lugged a Gladstone bag down the crooked stairs. A trunk was already close to the door; it had wrinkled the carpet and deranged the mat.

"You didn't forget to put the hair-brush in, did you, Amy?" he asked.

"N-no, Mr Cyril," she blubbered.

"Amy!" Constance sharply corrected her, as Cyril ran upstairs, "I wonder you can't control yourself better than that."

Amy weakly apologized. Although treated almost as one of the family, she ought not to have forgotten that she was a servant. What right had she to weep over Cyril's luggage? This question was put to her in Constance's tone.

The cab came. Cyril tumbled downstairs with exaggerated carelessness, and with exaggerated carelessness he joked at the cabman.

"Now, mother!" he cried, when the luggage was stowed. "Do you want me to miss the train?" But he knew that the margin of time was ample. It was his fun!

“Nay, I can’t be hurried!” she said, fixing her bonnet. “Amy, as soon as we are gone you can clear this table.”

She climbed heavily into the cab.

“That’s it! Smash the springs!” Cyril teased her.

The horse got a stinging cut to recall him to the seriousness of life. It was a fine, bracing autumn morning, and the driver felt the need of communicating his abundant energy to someone or something. They drove off, Amy staring after them from the door. Matters had been so marvellously well arranged that they arrived at the station twenty minutes before the train was due.

“Never mind!” Cyril mockingly comforted his mother. “You’d rather be twenty minutes too soon than one minute too late, wouldn’t you?”

His high spirits had to come out somehow.

Gradually the minutes passed, and the empty slate-tinted platform became dotted with people to whom that train was nothing but a Loop Line train, people who took that train every week-day of their lives and knew all its eccentricities.

And they heard the train whistle as it started from Turnhill. And Cyril had a final word with the porter who was in charge of the luggage. He made a handsome figure, and he had twenty pounds in his pocket. When he returned to Constance she was sniffing, and through her veil he could see that her eyes were circled with red. But through her veil she could see nothing. The train rolled in, rattling to a standstill. Constance lifted her veil and kissed him; and kissed her life out. He smelt the odour of her crape. He was, for an instant, close to her, close; and he seemed to have an overwhelmingly intimate glimpse into her secrets; he seemed to be choked in the sudden strong emotion of that crape. He felt queer.

“Here you are, sir! Second smoker!” called the porter.

The daily frequenters of the train boarded it with their customary disgust.

“I’ll write as soon as ever I get there!” said Cyril, of his own accord. It was the best he could muster.

With what grace he raised his hat!

A sliding-away; clouds of steam; and she shared the dead platform with milk-cans, two porters, and Smith’s noisy boy!

She walked home very slowly and painfully. The lump of lead was heavier than ever before. And the townspeople saw the proudest mother in Bursley walking home.

“After all,” she argued with her soul angrily, petulantly, “could you expect the boy to do anything else? He is a serious student, he has had a brilliant success, and is he to be tied to your apron-strings? The idea is preposterous. It isn’t as if he was an idler, or a bad son. No mother could have a better son. A nice thing that he should stay all his life in Bursley simply because you don’t like being left alone!”

Unfortunately one might as well argue with a mule as with one’s soul. Her soul only kept on saying monotonously: “I’m a lonely old woman now. I’ve nothing to live for any more, and I’m no use to anybody. Once I was young and proud. And this is what my life has come to! This is the end!”

When she reached home, Amy had not touched the breakfast things; the carpet was still wrinkled, and the mat still out of place. And, through the desolating atmosphere of reaction after a terrific crisis, she marched directly upstairs, entered his plundered room, and beheld the disorder of the bed in which he had slept.

BOOK THREE

SOPHIA

CHAPTER I

THE ELOPEMENT

I

Her soberly rich dress had a countrified air, as she waited, ready for the streets, in the bedroom of the London hotel on the afternoon of the first of July, 1866; but there was nothing of the provincial in that beautiful face, nor in that bearing at once shy and haughty; and her eager heart soared beyond geographical boundaries.

It was the Hatfield Hotel, in Salisbury Street, between the Strand and the river. Both street and hotel are now gone, lost in the vast foundations of the Savoy and the Cecil; but the type of the Hatfield lingers with ever-increasing shabbiness in Jermyn Street. In 1866, with its dark passages and crooked stairs, its candles, its carpets and stuffs which had outlived their patterns, its narrow dining-room where a thousand busy flies ate together at one long table, its acrid stagnant atmosphere, and its disturbing sensation of dirt everywhere concealing itself, it stood forth in rectitude as a good average modern hotel. The patched and senile drabness of the bedroom made an environment that emphasized Sophia's flashing youth. She alone in it was unsullied.

There was a knock at the door, apparently gay and jaunty. But she thought, truly: "He's nearly as nervous as I am!" And in her sick nervousness she coughed, and then tried to take full possession of herself. The moment had at last come which would divide her life as a battle divides the history of a nation. Her mind in an instant swept backwards through an incredible three months.

The schemings to obtain and to hide Gerald's letters at the shop, and to reply to them! The far more complex and dangerous duplicity practised upon her majestic aunt at Axe! The visits to the Axe post-office! The three divine meetings with Gerald at early morning by the canal-feeder, when he had told her of his inheritance and of the harshness of his uncle Boldero, and with a rush of words had spread before her the prospect of eternal bliss! The nights of fear! The sudden, dizzy acquiescence in his plan, and the feeling of universal unreality which obsessed her! The audacious departure from her aunt's, showering a cascade of appalling lies! Her dismay at Knype Station! Her blush as she asked for a ticket to London! The ironic, sympathetic glance of the porter, who took charge of her trunk! And then the thunder of the incoming train! Her renewed dismay when she found that it was very full, and her distracted plunge into a compartment with six people already in it! And the abrupt reopening of the carriage-door and that curt inquisition from an inspector: "Where for, please? Where for? Where for?" Until her turn was reached: "Where for, miss?" and her weak little reply: "Euston!" And more violent blushes! And then the long, steady beating of the train over the rails, keeping time to the rhythm of the unanswerable voice within her breast: "Why are you here? Why are you here?" And then Rugby; and the awful ordeal of meeting Gerald, his entry into the compartment, the rearrangement of seats, and their excruciatingly painful attempts at commonplace conversation in the publicity of the carriage! (She had felt that that part of the enterprise had not been very well devised by Gerald.) And at last London; the thousands of cabs, the fabulous streets, the general roar, all dream-surpassing, intensifying to an extraordinary degree the obsession of unreality, the illusion that she could not really have done what she had done, that she was not really doing what she was doing!

Supremely and finally, the delicious torture of the clutch of terror at her heart as she moved by Gerald's side through the impossible adventure! Who was this rash, mad Sophia? Surely not herself!

The knock at the door was impatiently repeated.

"Come in," she said timidly.

Gerald Scales came in. Yes, beneath that mien of a commercial traveller who has been everywhere and through everything, he was very nervous. It was her privacy that, with her consent, he had invaded. He had

engaged the bedroom only with the intention of using it as a retreat for Sophia until the evening, when they were to resume their travels. It ought not to have had any disturbing significance. But the mere disorder on the wash-stand, a towel lying on one of the cane chairs, made him feel that he was affronting decency, and so increased his jaunty nervousness. The moment was painful; the moment was difficult beyond his skill to handle it naturally.

Approaching her with factitious ease, he kissed her through her veil, which she then lifted with an impulsive movement, and he kissed her again, more ardently, perceiving that her ardour was exceeding his. This was the first time they had been alone together since her flight from Axe. And yet, with his worldly experience, he was naïve enough to be surprised that he could not put all the heat of passion into his embrace, and he wondered why he was not thrilled at the contact with her! However, the powerful clinging of her lips somewhat startled his senses, and also delighted him by its silent promise. He could smell the stuff of her veil, the sarsenet of her bodice, and, as it were wrapped in these odours as her body was wrapped in its clothes, the faint fleshly perfume of her body itself. Her face, viewed so close that he could see the almost imperceptible down on those fruit-like cheeks, was astonishingly beautiful; the dark eyes were exquisitely misted; and he could feel the secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him. She was very slightly taller than her lover; but somehow she hung from him, her body curved backwards, and her bosom pressed against his, so that instead of looking up at her gaze he looked down at it. He preferred that; perfectly proportioned though he was, his stature was a delicate point with him. His spirits rose by the uplift of his senses. His fears slipped away; he began to be very satisfied with himself. He was the inheritor of twelve thousand pounds, and he had won this unique creature. She was his capture; he held her close, permittedly scanning the minutiae of her skin, permittedly crushing her flimsy silks. Something in him had forced her to lay her modesty on the altar of his desire. And the sun brightly shone. So he kissed her yet more ardently, and with the slightest touch of a victor's condescension; and her burning response more than restored the self-confidence which he had been losing.

"I've got no one but you now," she murmured in a melting voice.

She fancied in her ignorance that the expression of this sentiment would please him. She was not aware that a man is usually rather chilled by it, because it proves to him that the other is thinking about his responsibilities and not about his privileges. Certainly it calmed Gerald, though without imparting to him her sense of his responsibilities. He smiled vaguely. To Sophia his smile was a miracle continually renewed; it mingled dashing gaiety with a hint of wistful appeal in a manner that never failed to bewitch her. A less innocent girl than Sophia might have divined from that adorable half-feminine smile that she could do anything with Gerald except rely on him. But Sophia had to learn.

"Are you ready?" he asked, placing his hands on her shoulders and holding her away from him.

"Yes," she said, nerving herself. Their faces were still very near together.

"Well, would you like to go and see the Doré pictures?"

A simple enough question! A proposal felicitous enough! Doré was becoming known even in the Five Towns, not, assuredly, by his illustrations to the *Contes Drolatiques* of Balzac, but by his shuddering Biblical conceits. In pious circles Doré was saving art from the reproach of futility and frivolity. It was indubitably a tasteful idea on Gerald's part to take his love of a summer's afternoon to gaze at the originals of those prints which had so deeply impressed the Five Towns. It was an idea that sanctified the profane adventure.

Yet Sophia showed signs of affliction. Her colour went and came; her throat made the motion of swallowing; there was a muscular contraction over her whole body. And she drew herself from him. Her glance, however, did not leave him, and his eyes fell before hers.

"But what about the—wedding?" she breathed.

That sentence seemed to cost all her pride; but she was obliged to utter it, and to pay for it.

"Oh," he said lightly and quickly, just as though she had reminded him of a detail that might have been forgotten, "I was just going to tell you. It can't be done here. There's been some change in the rules. I only found out for certain late last night. But I've ascertained that it'll be as simple as A B C before the English Consul in Paris; and as I've got the tickets for us to go over tonight, as we arranged . . ." He stopped.

She sat down on the towel-covered chair, staggered. She believed what he said. She did not suspect that he was using the classic device of the seducer. It was his casualness that staggered her. Had it really been his intention to set off on an excursion and remark as an afterthought: "*By the way*, we can't be married as I told you at half-past two today"? Despite her extreme ignorance and innocence, Sophia held a high opinion of her own common sense and capacity for looking after herself, and she could scarcely believe that he was expecting her to go to Paris, and at night, without being married. She looked pitiably young, virgin, raw, unsophisticated; helpless in the midst of dreadful dangers. Yet her head was full of a blank astonishment at being mistaken for a simpleton! The sole explanation could be that Gerald, in some matters, must himself be a confiding simpleton. He had not reflected. He had not sufficiently realized the immensity of her sacrifice in flying with him even to London. She felt sorry for him. She had the woman's first glimpse of the necessity for some adjustment of outlook as an essential preliminary to uninterrupted happiness.

"It'll be all right!" Gerald persuasively continued.

He looked at her, as she was not looking at him. She was nineteen. But she seemed to him utterly mature

and mysterious. Her face baffled him; her mind was a foreign land. Helpless in one sense she might be; yet she, and not he, stood for destiny; the future lay in the secret and capricious workings of that mind.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed curtly. "Oh no!"

"Oh no what?"

"We can't possibly go like that," she said.

"But don't I tell you it'll be all right?" he protested. "If we stay here and they come after you . . . ! Besides, I've got the tickets and all."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she demanded.

"But how could I?" he grumbled. "Have we had a single minute alone?"

This was nearly true. They could not have discussed the formalities of marriage in the crowded train, nor during the hurried lunch with a dozen cocked ears at the same table. He saw himself on sure ground here.

"Now, could we?" he pressed.

"And you talk about going to see pictures!" was her reply.

Undoubtedly this had been a grave error of tact. He recognized that it was a stupidity. And so he resented it, as though she had committed it and not he.

"My dear girl," he said, hurt, "I acted for the best. It isn't my fault if rules are altered and officials silly."

"You ought to have told me before," she persisted sullenly.

"But how *could* I?"

He almost believed in that moment that he had really intended to marry her, and that the ineptitudes of red-tape had prevented him from achieving his honourable purpose; whereas he had done nothing whatever towards the marriage.

"Oh no! Oh no!" she repeated, with heavy lip and liquid eye. "Oh no!"

He gathered that she was flouting his suggestion of Paris.

Slowly and nervously he approached her. She did not stir or look up. Her glance was fixed on the washstand. He bent down and murmured:

"Come, now. It'll be all right. You'll travel in the ladies' saloon on the steam-packet."

She did not stir. He bent lower and touched the back of her neck with his lips. And she sprang up, sobbing and angry. Because she was mad for him she hated him furiously. All tenderness had vanished.

"I'll thank you not to touch me!" she said fiercely. She had given him her lips a moment ago, but now to graze her neck was an insult.

He smiled sheepishly. "But really you must be reasonable," he argued. "What have I done?"

"It's what you haven't done, I think!" she cried. "Why didn't you tell me while we were in the cab?"

"I didn't care to begin worrying you just then," he replied: which was exactly true.

The fact was, he had of course shirked telling her that no marriage would occur that day. Not being a professional seducer of young girls, he lacked skill to do a difficult thing simply.

"Now come along, little girl," he went on, with just a trifle of impatience. "Let's go out and enjoy ourselves. I assure you that everything will be all right in Paris."

"That's what you said about coming to London," she retorted sarcastically through her sobs. "And look at you!"

Did he imagine for a single instant that she would have come to London with him save on the understanding that she was to be married immediately upon arrival? This attitude of an indignant question was not to be reconciled with her belief that his excuses for himself were truthful. But she did not remark the discrepancy.

Her sarcasm wounded his vanity.

"Oh, very well!" he muttered. "If you don't choose to believe what I say!" He shrugged his shoulders.

She said nothing, but the sobs swept at intervals through her frame, shaking it.

Reading hesitation in her face, he tried again. "Come along, little girl. And wipe your eyes." And he approached her. She stepped back.

"No, no!" she denied him, passionately. He had esteemed her too cheaply. And she did not care to be called "little girl."

"Then what shall you do?" he inquired, in a tone which blended mockery and bullying. She was making a fool of him.

"I can tell you what I shan't do," she said. "I shan't go to Paris." Her sobs were less frequent.

"That's not my question," he said icily. "I want to know what you will do."

There was now no pretence of affectionateness either on her part or on his. They might, to judge from their attitudes, have been nourished from infancy on mutual hatred.

"What's that got to do with you?" she demanded.

"It's got everything to do with me," he said.

"Well, you can go and find out!" she said.

It was girlish;it was childish;it was scarcely according to the canons for conducting a final rupture; but it was not the less tragically serious. Indeed, the spectacle of this young girl absurdly behaving like one in a serious crisis increased the tragicalness of the situation even if it did not heighten it. The idea that ran

through Gerald's brain was the ridiculous folly of having anything to do with young girls. He was quite blind to her beauty.

" 'Go'?" he repeated her word. "You mean that?"

"Of course I mean it," she answered promptly.

The coward in him urged him to take advantage of her ignorant, helpless pride, and leave her at her word. He remembered the scene she had made at the pit shaft, and he said to himself that her charm was not worth her temper, and that he was a fool ever to have dreamed that it was, and that he would be doubly a fool now not to seize the opportunity of withdrawing from an insane enterprise.

"I am to go?" he asked, with a sneer.

She nodded.

"Of course if you order me to leave you, I must. Can I do anything for you?"

She signified that he could not.

"Nothing? You're sure?"

She frowned.

"Well, then, good-bye." He turned towards the door.

"I suppose you'd leave me here without money or anything?" she said in a cold, cutting voice. And her sneer was far more destructive than his. It destroyed in him the last trace of compassion for her.

"Oh, I beg pardon!" he said, and swaggeringly counted out five sovereigns on to a chest of drawers.

She rushed at them. "Do you think I'll take your odious money?" she snarled, gathering the coins in her gloved hand.

Her first impulse was to throw them in his face; but she paused and then flung them into a corner of the room.

"Pick them up!" she commanded him.

"No, thanks," he said briefly; and left, shutting the door.

Only a very little while, and they had been lovers, exuding tenderness with every gesture, like a perfume! Only a very little while, and she had been deciding to telegraph condescendingly to her mother that she was "all right"! And now the dream was utterly dissolved. And the voice of that hard common sense which spake to her in her wildest moods grew loud in asserting that the enterprise could never have come to any good, that it was from its inception an impossible enterprise, unredeemed by the slightest justification. An enormous folly! Yes, an elopement; but not like a real elopement; always unreal! She had always known that it was only an imitation of an elopement, and must end in some awful disappointment. She had never truly wanted to run away; but something within her had pricked her forward in spite of her protests. The strict notions of her elderly relatives were right after all. It was she who had been wrong. And it was she who would have to pay.

"I've been a wicked girl," she said to herself grimly, in the midst of her ruin.

She faced the fact. But she would not repent; at any rate she would never sit on that stool. She would not exchange the remains of her pride for the means of escape from the worst misery that life could offer. On that point she knew herself. And she set to work to repair and renew her pride.

Whatever happened she would not return to the Five Towns. She could not, because she had stolen money from her Aunt Harriet. As much as she had thrown back at Gerald, she had filched from her aunt, but in the form of a note. A prudent, mysterious instinct had moved her to take this precaution. And she was glad. She would never have been able to dart that sneer at Gerald about money if she had really needed money. So she rejoiced in her crime; though since Aunt Harriet would assuredly discover the loss at once, the crime eternally prevented her from going back to her family. Never, never would she look at her mother with the eyes of a thief!

(In truth Aunt Harriet did discover the loss, and very creditably said naught about it to anybody. The knowledge of it would have twisted the knife in the maternal heart.)

Sophia was also glad that she had refused to proceed to Paris. The recollection of her firmness in refusing flattered her vanity as a girl convinced that she could take care of herself. To go to Paris unmarried would have been an inconceivable madness. The mere thought of the enormity did outrage to her moral susceptibilities. No, Gerald had most perfectly mistaken her for another sort of girl; as, for instance, a shop-assistant or a barmaid!

With this the catalogue of her satisfactions ended. She had no idea at all as to what she ought to do, or could do. The mere prospect of venturing out of the room intimidated her. Had Gerald left her trunk in the hall? Of course he had. What a question! But what would happen to her? London . . . London had merely dazed her. She could do nothing for herself. She was as helpless as a rabbit in London. She drew aside the window-curtain and had a glimpse of the river. It was inevitable that she should think of suicide; for she could not suppose that any girl had ever got herself into a plight more desperate than hers. "I could slip out at night and drown myself," she thought seriously. "A nice thing that would be for Gerald!"

Then loneliness, like a black midnight, overwhelmed her, swiftly wasting her strength, disintegrating her pride in its horrid flood. She glanced about for support, as a woman in the open street who feels she is going to faint, and went blindly to the bed, falling on it with the upper part of her body, in an attitude of abandonment. She wept, but without sobbing.

II

Gerald Scales walked about the Strand, staring up at its high narrow houses, crushed one against another as though they had been packed, unsorted, by a packer who thought of nothing but economy of space. Except by Somerset House, King's College, and one or two theatres and banks, the monotony of mean shops, with several storeys unevenly perched over them, was unbroken. Then Gerald encountered Exeter Hall, and examined its prominent façade with a provincial's eye; for despite his travels he was not very familiar with London. Exeter Hall naturally took his mind back to his Uncle Boldero, that great and ardent Nonconformist, and his own godly youth. It was laughable to muse upon what his uncle would say and think, did the old man know that his nephew had run away with a girl, meaning to seduce her in Paris? It was enormously funny!

However, he had done with all that. He was well out of it. She had told him to go, and he had gone. She had money to get home; she had nothing to do but use the tongue in her head. The rest was her affair. He would go to Paris alone, and find another amusement. It was absurd to have supposed that Sophia would ever have suited him. Not in such a family as the Baineses could one reasonably expect to discover an ideal mistress. No! there had been a mistake. The whole business was wrong. She had nearly made a fool of him. But he was not the man to be made a fool of. He had kept his dignity intact.

So he said to himself. Yet all the time his dignity, and his pride also, were bleeding, dropping invisible blood along the length of the Strand pavements.

He was at Salisbury Street again. He pictured her in the bedroom. Damn her! He wanted her. He wanted her with an excessive desire. He hated to think that he had been baulked. He hated to think that she would remain immaculate. And he continued to picture her in the exciting privacy of that cursed bedroom.

Now he was walking down Salisbury Street. He did not wish to be walking down Salisbury Street; but there he was!

"Oh, hell!" he murmured. "I suppose I must go through with it."

He felt desperate. He was ready to pay any price in order to be able to say to himself that he had accomplished what he had set his heart on.

"My wife hasn't gone out, has she?" he asked of the hall-porter.

"I'm not sure, sir; I think not," said the hall-porter.

The fear that Sophia had already departed made him sick. When he noticed her trunk still there, he took hope and ran upstairs.

He saw her, a dark, crumpled, sinuous piece of humanity, half on and half off the bed, silhouetted against the bluish-white counterpane; her hat was on the floor, with the spotted veil trailing away from it. This sight seemed to him to be the most touching that he had ever seen, though her face was hidden. He forgot everything except the deep and strange emotion which affected him. He approached the bed. She did not stir.

Having heard the entry and knowing that it must be Gerald who had entered, Sophia forced herself to remain still. A wild, splendid hope shot up in her. Constrained by all the power of her will not to move, she could not stifle a sob that had lain in ambush in her throat.

The sound of the sob fetched tears to the eyes of Gerald.

"Sophia!" he appealed to her.

But she did not stir. Another sob shook her.

"Very well, then," said Gerald. "We'll stay in London till we can be married. I'll arrange it. I'll find a nice boarding-house for you, and I'll tell the people you're my cousin. I shall stay on at this hotel, and I'll come and see you every day."

A silence.

"Thank you!" she blubbered. "Thank you!"

He saw that her little gloved hand was stretching out towards him, like a feeler; and he seized it, and knelt down and took her clumsily by the waist. Somehow he dared not kiss her yet.

An immense relief surged very slowly through them both.

"I—I—really—" She began to say something, but the articulation was lost in her sobs.

"What? What do you say, dearest?" he questioned eagerly.

And she made another effort. "I really couldn't have gone to Paris with you without being married," she succeeded at last. "I really couldn't."

"No, no!" he soothed her. "Of course you couldn't. It was I who was wrong. But you didn't know how I felt . . . Sophia, it's all right now, isn't it?"

She sat up and kissed him fairly.

It was so wonderful and startling that he burst openly into tears. She saw in the facile intensity of his emotion a guarantee of their future happiness. And as he had soothed her, so now she soothed him. They clung together, equally surprised at the sweet, exquisite, blissful melancholy which drenched them through and through. It was remorse for having quarrelled, for having lacked faith in the supreme rightness of the high adventure. Everything was right, and would be right; and they had been criminally absurd. It was remorse; but it was pure bliss, and worth the quarrel! Gerald resumed his perfection again in her eyes! He was

the soul of goodness and honour! And for him she was again the ideal mistress, who would, however, be also a wife. As in his mind he rapidly ran over the steps necessary to their marriage, he kept saying to himself, far off in some remote cavern of the brain: “I shall have her! I shall have her!” He did not reflect that this fragile slip of the Baines stock, unconsciously drawing upon the accumulated strength of generations of honest living, had put a defeat upon him.

After tea, Gerald, utterly content with the universe, redeemed his word and found an irreproachable boarding-house for Sophia in Westminster, near the Abbey. She was astonished at the glibness of his lies to the landlady about her, and about their circumstances generally. He also found a church and a parson, close by, and in half an hour the formalities preliminary to a marriage were begun. He explained to her that as she was now resident in London, it would be simpler to recommence the business entirely. She sagaciously agreed. As she by no means wished to wound him again, she made no inquiry about those other formalities which, owing to red-tape, had so unexpectedly proved abortive! She knew she was going to be married, and that sufficed. The next day she carried out her filial idea of telegraphing to her mother.

CHAPTER II

SUPPER

I

They had been to Versailles and had dined there. A tram had sufficed to take them out; but for the return, Gerald, who had been drinking champagne, would not be content with less than a carriage. Further, he insisted on entering Paris by way of the Bois and the Arc de Triomphe. Thoroughly to appease his conceit, it would have been necessary to swing open the gates of honour in the Arc and allow his fiacre to pass through; to be forced to drive round the monument instead of under it hurt the sense of fitness which champagne engenders. Gerald was in all his pride that day. He had been displaying the wonders to Sophia, and he could not escape the cicerone’s secret feeling: that he himself was somehow responsible for the wonders. Moreover, he was exceedingly satisfied with the effect produced by Sophia.

Sophia, on arriving in Paris with the ring on her triumphant finger, had timidly mentioned the subject of frocks. None would have guessed from her tone that she was possessed by the desire for French clothes as by a devil. She had been surprised and delighted by the eagerness of Gerald’s response. Gerald, too, was possessed by a devil. He thirsted to see her in French clothes. He knew some of the shops and ateliers in the Rue de la Paix, the Rue de la Chaussée d’Antin, and the Palais Royal. He was much more skilled in the lore of frocks than she, for his previous business in Paris had brought him into relations with the great firms; and Sophia suffered a brief humiliation in the discovery that his private opinion of her dresses was that they were not dresses at all. She had been aware that they were not Parisian, nor even of London; but she had thought them pretty good. It healed her wound, however, to reflect that Gerald had so marvellously kept his own counsel in order to spare her self-love. Gerald had taken her to an establishment in the Chaussée d’Antin. It was not one of what Gerald called *les grandes maisons,* but it was on the very fringe of them, and the real *haute couture* was practised therein; and Gerald was remembered there by name.

Sophia had gone in trembling and ashamed, yet in her heart courageously determined to emerge uncompromisingly French. But the models frightened her. They surpassed even the most fantastic things that she had seen in the streets. She recoiled before them and seemed to hide for refuge in Gerald, as it were appealing to him for moral protection, and answering to him instead of to the saleswoman when the saleswoman offered remarks in stiff English. The prices also frightened her. The simplest trifle here cost sixteen pounds; and her mother’s historic “silk,” whose elaborateness had cost twelve pounds, was supposed to have approached the inexpressible! Gerald said that she was not to think about prices. She was, however, forced by some instinct to think about prices—she who at home had scorned the narrowness of life in the Square. In the Square she was understood to be quite without common sense, hopelessly imprudent; yet here, a spring of sagacity seemed to be welling up in her all the time, a continual antidote against the general madness in which she found herself. With extraordinary rapidity she had formed a habit of preaching moderation to Gerald. She hated to “see money thrown away,” and her notion of the boundary line between throwing money away and judiciously spending it was still the notion of the Square.

Gerald would laugh. But she would say, piqued and blushing, but self-sure: “You can laugh!” It was all deliciously agreeable.

On this evening she wore the first of the new costumes. She had worn it all day. Characteristically she had chosen something which was not too special for either afternoon or evening, for either warm or cold weather. It was of pale blue taffetas striped in a darker blue, with the corsage cut in basques, and the underskirt of a similar taffetas, but unstriped. The effect of the ornate overskirt falling on the plain underskirt with its small double *volant* was, she thought, and Gerald too, adorable. The waist was higher than any she had had before, and the crinoline expansive. Tied round her head with a large bow and flying blue ribbons under the chin, was a fragile flat *capote* like a baby’s bonnet, which allowed her hair to escape in front and her great chignon behind. A large spotted veil flew out from the *capote* over the chignon. Her double skirts waved amply over Gerald’s knees in the carriage, and she leaned back against the hard cushions and put an arrogant look into her face, and thought of nothing, but the intense throbbing joy of life, longing with painful ardour for more and more pleasure, then and for ever.

As the carriage slipped downwards through the wide, empty gloom of the Champs Elysées into the brilliant Paris that was waiting for them, another carriage drawn by two white horses flashed upwards and was gone in dust. Its only occupant, except the coachman and footman, was a woman. Gerald stared after it.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed. “That’s Hortense!”

It might have been Hortense, or it might not. But he instantly convinced himself that it was. Not every evening did one meet Hortense driving alone in the Champs Elysées, and in August too!

“Hortense?” Sophia asked simply.

“Yes. Hortense Schneider.”

“Who is she?”

“You’ve never heard of Hortense Schneider?”

“No!”

“Well! Have you ever heard of Offenbach?”

“I—I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

He had the mien of utter incredulity. “You don’t mean to say you’ve never heard of *Bluebeard*?”

“I’ve heard of Bluebeard, of course,” said she. “Who hasn’t?”

“I mean the opera—Offenbach’s.”

She shook her head, scarce knowing even what an opera was.

“Well, well! What next?”

He implied that such ignorance stood alone in his experience. Really he was delighted at the cleanness of the slate on which he had to write. And Sophia was not a bit alarmed. She relished instruction from his lips. It was a pleasure to her to learn from that exhaustless store of worldly knowledge. To the world she would do her best to assume omniscience in its ways, but to him, in her present mood, she liked to play the ignorant, uninitiated little thing.

“Why,” he said, “the Schneider has been the rage since last year but one. Absolutely the *rage*.”

“I do wish I’d noticed her!” said Sophia.

“As soon as the Variétés reopens we’ll go and see her,” he replied, and then gave his detailed version of the career of Hortense Schneider.

More joys for her in the near future! She had yet scarcely penetrated the crust of her bliss. She exulted in the dazzling destiny which comprised freedom, fortune, eternal gaiety, and the exquisite Gerald.

As they crossed the Place de la Concorde, she inquired, “Are we going back to the hotel?”

“No,” he said. “I thought we’d go and have supper somewhere, if it isn’t too early.”

“After all that dinner?”

“All what dinner? You ate about five times as much as me, anyhow!”

“Oh, *I’m* ready!” she said.

She was. This day, because it was the first day of her French frock, she regarded as her *début* in the dizzy life of capitals. She existed in a rapture of bliss, an ecstasy which could feel no fatigue, either of body or spirit.

II

It was after midnight when they went into the Restaurant Sylvain; Gerald, having decided not to go to the hotel, had changed his mind and called there, and having called there, had remained a long time: this of course! Sophia was already accustoming herself to the idea that, with Gerald, it was impossible to predict accurately more than five minutes of the future.

As the *chasseur* held open the door for them to enter, and Sophia passed modestly into the glowing yellow interior of the restaurant, followed by Gerald in his character of man-of-the-world, they drew the attention of Sylvain’s numerous and glittering guests. No face could have made a more provocative contrast to the women’s faces in those screened rooms than the face of Sophia, so childlike between the baby’s bonnet and the huge bow of ribbon, so candid, so charmingly conscious of its own pure beauty and of the fact that she was no longer a virgin, but the equal in knowledge of any woman alive. She saw around her, clustered about

the white tables, multitudes of violently red lips, powdered cheeks, cold, hard eyes, self-possessed arrogant faces, and insolent bosoms. What had impressed her more than anything else in Paris, more even than the three-horsed omnibuses, was the extraordinary self-assurance of all the women, their unashamed posing, their calm acceptance of the public gaze. They seemed to say: “We are the renowned Parisiennes.” They frightened her: they appeared to her so corrupt and so proud in their corruption. She had already seen a dozen women in various situations of conspicuousness apply powder to their complexions with no more ado than if they had been giving a pat to their hair. She could not understand such boldness. As for them, they marvelled at the phenomena presented in Sophia’s person; they admired; they admitted the style of the gown; but they envied neither her innocence nor her beauty; they envied nothing but her youth and the fresh tint of her cheeks.

“Encore des Anglais!” said some of them, as if that explained all.

Gerald had a very curt way with waiters; and the more obsequious they were, the haughtier he became; and a head-waiter was no more to him than a scullion. He gave loud-voiced orders in French of which both he and Sophia were proud, and a table was laid for them in a corner near one of the large windows. Sophia settled herself on the bench of green velvet, and began to ply the ivory fan which Gerald had given her. It was very hot; all the windows were wide open, and the sounds of the street mingled clearly with the tinkle of the supper-room. Outside, against a sky of deepest purple, Sophia could discern the black skeleton of a gigantic building; it was the new opera house.

“All sorts here!” said Gerald, contentedly, after he had ordered iced soup and sparkling Moselle. Sophia did not know what Moselle was, but she imagined that anything would be better than champagne.

Sylvain’s was then typical of the Second Empire, and particularly famous as a supper-room. Expensive and gay, it provided, with its discreet decorations, a sumptuous scene where lorettes, actresses, respectable women, and an occasional grisette in luck, could satisfy their curiosity as to each other, In its catholicity it was highly correct as a resort; not many other restaurants in the centre could have successfully fought against the rival attractions of the Bois and the dim groves of the Champs Elysées on a night in August. The complicated richness of the dresses, the yards and yards of fine stitchery, the endless ruching, the hints, more or less incautious, nether treasures of embroidered linen; and, leaping over all this to the eye, the vivid colourings of silks and muslins, veils, plumes, and flowers, piled as it were pell-mell in heaps on the universal green cushions to the farthest vista of the restaurant, and all multiplied in gilt mirrors—the spectacle intoxicated Sophia. Her eyes gleamed. She drank the soup with eagerness, and tasted the wine, though no desire on her part to like wine could make her like it; and then, seeing pineapples on a large table covered with fruits, she told Gerald that she should like some pineapple, and Gerald ordered one.

She gathered her self-esteem and her wits together, and began to give Gerald her views on the costumes. She could do so with impunity, because her own was indubitably beyond criticism. Some she wholly condemned, and there was not one which earned her unreserved approval. All the absurd fastidiousness of her schoolgirlish provinciality emerged in that eager, affected torrent of remarks. However, she was clever enough to read, after a time, in Gerald’s tone and features, that she was making a tedious fool of herself. And she adroitly shifted her criticism from the taste to the *work*—she put a strong accent on the word—and pronounced that to be miraculous beyond description. She reckoned that she knew what dressmaking and millinery were, and her little fund of expert knowledge caused her to picture a whole necessary cityful of girls stitching, stitching, and stitching day and night. She had wondered, during the few odd days that they had spent in Paris, between visits to Chantilly and other places, at the massed luxury of the shops; she had wondered, starting with St Luke’s Square as a standard, how they could all thrive. But now in her first real glimpse of the banal and licentious profusion of one among a hundred restaurants, she wondered that the shops were so few. She thought how splendid was all this expensiveness for trade. Indeed, the notions chasing each other within that lovely and foolish head were a surprising medley.

“Well, what do you think of Sylvain’s?” Gerald asked, impatient to be assured that his Sylvain’s had duly overwhelmed her.

“Oh, Gerald!” she murmured, indicating that speech was inadequate. And she just furtively touched his hand with hers.

The ennui due to her critical disquisition on the shortcomings of Parisian costume cleared away from Gerald’s face.

“What do you suppose those people are talking about?” he said with a jerk of the head towards a chattering group of three gorgeous lorettes and two middle-aged men at the next table but one.

“What are they talking about?”

“They’re talking about the execution of the murderer Rivain that takes place at Auxerre the day after tomorrow. They’re arranging to make up a party and go and see it.”

“Oh, what a horrid idea!” said Sophia.

“Guillotine, you know!” said Gerald.

“But can people see it?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, I think it’s horrible.”

“Yes, that’s why people like to go and see it. Besides, the man isn’t an ordinary sort of criminal at all. He’s

very young and good looking, and well-connected. And he killed the celebrated Claudine . . .”

“Claudine?”

“Claudine Jacquinot. Of course you wouldn’t know. She was a tremendous—er—wrong ’un here in the forties. Made a lot of money, and retired to her native town.”

Sophia, in spite of her efforts to maintain the *rôle* of a woman who has nothing to learn, blushed.

“Then she was older than he is.”

“Thirty-five years older, if a day.”

“What did he kill her for?”

“She wouldn’t give him enough money. She was his mistress—or rather one of ’em. He wanted money for a young lady friend, you see. He killed her and took all the jewels she was wearing. Whenever he went to see her she always wore all her best jewels—and you may bet a woman like that had a few. It seems she had been afraid for a long time that he meant to do for her.”

“Then why did she see him? And why did she wear her jewels?”

“Because she liked being afraid, goose! Some women only enjoy themselves when they’re terrified. Queer, isn’t it?”

Gerald insisted on meeting his wife’s gaze as he finished these revelations. He pretended that such stories were the commonest things on earth, and that to be scandalized by them was infantile. Sophia, thrust suddenly into a strange civilization perfectly frank in its sensuality and its sensuousness, under the guidance of a young man to whom her half-formed intelligence was a most diverting toy—Sophia felt mysteriously uncomfortable, disturbed by sinister, flitting phantoms of ideas which she only dimly apprehended. Her eyes fell. Gerald laughed self-consciously. She would not eat any more pineapple.

Immediately afterwards there came into the restaurant an apparition which momentarily stopped every conversation in the room. It was a tall and mature woman who wore over a dress of purplish-black silk a vast flowing *sortie de bal* of vermilion velvet, looped and tasselled with gold. No other costume could live by the side of that garment, Arab in shape, Russian in colour, and Parisian in style. It blazed. The woman’s heavy coiffure was bound with fillets of gold braid and crimson rosettes. She was followed by a young Englishman in evening dress and whiskers of the most exact correctness. The woman sailed, a little breathlessly, to a table next to Gerald’s, and took possession of it with an air of use, almost of tedium. She sat down, threw the cloak from her majestic bosom, and expanded her chest. Seeming to ignore the Englishman, who superciliously assumed the seat opposite to her, she let her large scornful eyes travel round the restaurant, slowly and imperiously meeting the curiosity which she had evoked. Her beauty had undoubtedly been dazzling, it was still effulgent; but the blossom was about to fall. She was admirably rouged and powdered; her arms were glorious; her lashes were long. There was little fault, save the excessive ripeness of a blonde who fights in vain against obesity. And her clothes combined audacity with the propriety of fashion. She carelessly deposed costly trinkets on the table, and then, having intimidated the whole company, she accepted the menu from the head-waiter and began to study it.

“That’s one of ’em!” Gerald whispered to Sophia.

“One of what?” Sophia whispered.

Gerald raised his eyebrows warningly, and winked. The Englishman had overheard; and a look of frigid displeasure passed across his proud face. Evidently he belonged to a rank much higher than Gerald’s; and Gerald, though he could always comfort himself by the thought that he had been to a university with the best, felt his own inferiority and could not hide that he felt it. Gerald was wealthy; he came of a wealthy family; but he had not the habit of wealth. When he spent money furiously, he did it with bravado, too conscious of grandeur and too conscious of the difficulties of acquiring that which he threw away. For Gerald had earned money. This whiskered Englishman had never earned money, never known the value of it, never imagined himself without as much of it as he might happen to want. He had the face of one accustomed to give orders and to look down upon inferiors. He was absolutely sure of himself. That his companion chiefly ignored him did not appear to incommode him in the least. She spoke to him in French. He replied in English, very briefly; and then, in English, he commanded the supper. As soon as the champagne was served he began to drink; in the intervals of drinking he gently stroked his whiskers. The woman spoke no more.

Gerald talked more loudly. With that aristocratic Englishman observing him, he could not remain at ease. And not only did he talk more loudly; he brought into his conversation references to money, travels, and worldly experiences. While seeking to impress the Englishman, he was merely becoming ridiculous to the Englishman; and obscurely he was aware of this. Sophia noticed and regretted it. Still, feeling very unimportant herself, she was reconciled to the superiority of the whiskered Englishman as to a natural fact. Gerald’s behaviour slightly lowered him in her esteem. Then she looked at him—at his well-shaped neatness, his vivacious face, his excellent clothes, and decided that he was much to be preferred to any heavy-jawed, long-nosed aristocrat alive.

The woman whose vermilion cloak lay around her like a fortification spoke to her escort. He did not understand. He tried to express himself in French, and failed. Then the woman recommenced, talking at length. When she had done he shook his head. His acquaintance with French was limited to the vocabulary of food.

“Guillotine!” he murmured, the sole word of her discourse that he had understood.

“Oui, oui! Guillotine. Enfin . . . !” cried the woman excitedly. Encouraged by her success in conveying even one word of her remarks, she began a third time.

“Excuse me,” said Gerald. “Madame is talking about the execution at Auxerre the day after tomorrow. N’est-ce-pas, madame, que vous parliez de Rivain?”

The Englishman glared angrily at Gerald’s officious interruption. But the woman smiled benevolently on Gerald, and insisted on talking to her friend through him. And the Englishman had to make the best of the situation.

“There isn’t a restaurant in Paris tonight where they aren’t talking about that execution,” said Gerald on his own account.

“Indeed!” observed the Englishman.

Wine affected them in different ways.

Now a fragile, short young Frenchman, with an extremely pale face ending in a thin black imperial, appeared at the entrance. He looked about, and, recognizing the woman of the scarlet cloak, very discreetly saluted her. Then he saw Gerald, and his worn, fatigued features showed a sudden startled smile. He came rapidly forward, hat in hand, seized Gerald’s palm and greeted him effusively.

“My wife,” said Gerald, with the solemn care of a man who is determined to prove that he is entirely sober.

The young man became grave and excessively ceremonious. He bowed low over Sophia’s hand and kissed it. Her impulse was to laugh, but the gravity of the young man’s deference stopped her. She glanced at Gerald, blushing, as if to say: “This comedy is not my fault.” Gerald said something, the young man turned to him and his face resumed its welcoming smile.

“This is Monsieur Chirac,” Gerald at length completed the introduction, “a friend of mine when I lived in Paris.”

He was proud to have met by accident an acquaintance in a restaurant. It demonstrated that he was a Parisian, and improved his standing with the whiskered Englishman and vermilion cloak.

“It is the first time you come Paris, madame?” Chirac addressed himself to Sophia, in limping, timorous English.

“Yes,” she giggled. He bowed again.

Chirac, with his best compliments, felicitated Gerald upon his marriage.

“Don’t mention it!” said the humorous Gerald in English, amused at his own wit; and then: “What about this execution?”

“Ah!” replied Chirac, breathing out a long breath, and smiling at Sophia. “Rivain! Rivain!” He made a large, important gesture with his hand.

It was at once to be seen that Gerald had touched the topic which secretly ravaged the supper-world as a subterranean fire ravages a mine.

“I go!” said Chirac, with pride, glancing at Sophia, who smiled, self-consciously.

Chirac entered upon a conversation with Gerald in French. Sophia comprehended that Gerald was surprised and impressed by what Chirac told him and that Chirac in turn was surprised. Then Gerald laboriously found his pocket-book, and after some fumbling with it handed it to Chirac so that the latter might write in it.

“Madame!” murmured Chirac, resuming his ceremonious stiffness in order to take leave. “Alors, c’est entendu, mon cher ami!” he said to Gerald, who nodded phlegmatically. And Chirac went away to the next table but one, where were the three lorettes and the two middle-aged men. He was received there with enthusiasm.

Sophia began to be teased by a little fear that Gerald was not quite his usual self. She did not think of him as tipsy. The idea of his being tipsy would have shocked her. She did not think clearly at all. She was lost and dazed in the labyrinth of new and vivid impressions into which Gerald had led her. But her prudence was awake.

“I think I’m tired,” she said in a low voice.

“You don’t want to go, do you?” he asked, hurt.

“Well—”

“Oh, wait a bid!”

The owner of the vermilion cloak spoke again to Gerald, who showed that he was flattered. While talking to her he ordered a brandy-and-soda. And then he could not refrain from displaying to her his familiarity with Parisian life, and he related how he had met Hortense Schneider behind a pair of white horses. The vermilion cloak grew even more sociable at the mention of this resounding name, and chattered with the most agreeable vivacity. Her friend stared inimically.

“Do you hear that?” Gerald explained to Sophia, who was sitting silent. “About Hortense Schneider—you know, we met her tonight. It seems she made a bet of a louis with some fellow, and when he lost he sent her the louis set in diamonds worth a hundred thousand francs. That’s how they go on here.”

“Oh!” cried Sophia, farther than ever in the labyrinth.

“’Scuse me,” the Englishman put in heavily. He had heard the words “Hortense Schneider,” “Hortense Schneider,” repeating themselves in the conversation, and at last it had occurred to him that the conversation

was about Hortense Schneider. " 'Scuse me," he began again. "Are you—do you mean Hortense Schneider?"

"Yes," said Gerald. "We met her tonight."

"She's in Trouville," said the Englishman, flatly.

Gerald shook his head positively.

"I gave a supper to her in Trouville last night," said the Englishman. "And she plays at the Casino Theatre tonight."

Gerald was repulsed but not defeated. "What is she playing in tonight? Tell me that!" he sneered.

"I don't see why I sh'd tell you."

"Hm!" Gerald retorted. "If what you say is true, it's a very strange thing I should have seen her in the Champs Elysées tonight, isn't it?"

The Englishman drank more wine. "If you want to insult me, sir—" he began coldly.

"Gerald!" Sophia urged in a whisper.

"Be quiet!" Gerald snapped.

A fiddler in fancy costume plunged into the restaurant at that moment and began to play wildly. The shock of his strange advent momentarily silenced the quarrel; but soon it leaped up again, under the shelter of the noisy music—the common, tedious, tippler's quarrel. It rose higher and higher. The fiddler looked askance at it over his fiddle. Chirac cautiously observed it. Instead of attending to the music, the festal company attended to the quarrel. Three waiters in a group watched it with an impartial sporting interest. The English voices grew more menacing.

Then suddenly the whiskered Englishman, jerking his head towards the door, said more quietly:

"Hadn't we better settle this outside?"

"At your service!" said Gerald, rising.

The owner of the vermilion cloak lifted her eyebrows to Chirac in fatigued disgust, but she said nothing. Nor did Sophia say anything. Sophia was overcome by terror.

The swain of the cloak, dragging his coat after him across the floor, left the restaurant without offering any apology or explanation to his lady.

"Wait here for me," said Gerald defiantly to Sophia. "I shall be back in a minute."

"But, Gerald!" She put her hand on his sleeve.

He snatched his arm away. "Wait here for me, I tell you," he repeated.

The doorkeeper obsequiously opened the door to the two unsteady carousers, for whom the fiddler drew back still playing.

Thus Sophia was left side by side with the vermilion cloak. She was quite helpless. All the pride of a married woman had abandoned her. She stood transfixed by intense shame, staring painfully at a pillar, to avoid the universal assault of eyes. She felt like an indiscreet little girl, and she looked like one. No youthful radiant beauty of features, no grace and style of a Parisian dress, no certificate of a ring, no premature initiation into the mysteries, could save her from the appearance of a raw fool whose foolishness had been her undoing. Her face changed to its reddest, and remained at that, and all the fundamental innocence of her nature, which had been overlaid by the violent experiences of her brief companionship with Gerald, rose again to the surface with that blush. Her situation drew pity from a few hearts and a careless contempt from the rest. But since once more it was a question of *ces Anglais,* nobody could be astonished.

Without moving her head, she twisted her eyes to the clock: half-past two. The fiddler ceased his dance and made a collection in his tasselled cap. The vermilion cloak threw a coin into the cap. Sophia stared at it moveless, until the fiddler, tired of waiting, passed to the next table and relieved her agony. She had no money at all. She set herself to watch the dock; but its fingers would not stir.

With an exclamation the lady of the cloak got up and peered out of the window, chatted with waiters, and then removed herself and her cloak to the next table, where she was received with amiable sympathy by the three lorettes, Chirac, and the other two men. The party surreptitiously examined Sophia from time to time. Then Chirac went outside with the head-waiter, returned, consulted with his friends, and finally approached Sophia. It was twenty minutes past three.

He renewed his magnificent bow. "Madame," he said carefully, "will you allow me to bring you to your hotel?"

He made no reference to Gerald, partly, doubtless, because his English was treacherous on difficult ground.

Sophia had not sufficient presence of mind to thank her saviour.

"But the bill?" she stammered. "The bill isn't paid."

He did not instantly understand her. But one of the waiters had caught the sound of a familiar word, and sprang forward with a slip of paper on a plate.

"I have no money," said Sophia, with a feeble smile.

"Je vous arrangerai ça," he said. "What name of the hotel? Meurice, is it not?"

"Hotel Meurice," said Sophia. "Yes."

He spoke to the head-waiter about the bill, which was carried away like something obscene; and on his arm, which he punctiliously offered and she could not refuse, Sophia left the scene of her ignominy. She was so distraught that she could not manage her crinoline in the doorway. No sign anywhere outside of Gerald or

his foe!

He put her into an open carriage, and in five minutes they had clattered down the brilliant silence of the Rue de la Paix, through the Place Vendôme into the Rue de Rivoli; and the night-porter of the hotel was at the carriage-step.

"I tell them at the restaurant where, you gone," said Chirac, bare-headed under the long colonnade of the street. "If your husband is there, I tell him. Till tomorrow . . .!"

His manners were more wonderful than any that Sophia had ever imagined. He might have been in the dark Tuileries on the opposite side of the street, saluting an empress, instead of taking leave of a raw little girl, who was still too disturbed even to thank him.

She fled, candle in hand, up the wide, many-cornered stairs; Gerald might be already in the bedroom . . . drunk! There was a chance. But the gilt-fringed bedroom was empty. She sat down at the velvet-covered table amid the shadows cast by the candle that wavered in the draught from the open window. And she set her teeth and a cold fury possessed her in the hot and languorous night. Gerald was an imbecile. That he should have allowed himself to get tipsy was bad enough, but that he should have exposed her to the horrible situation from which Chirac had extricated her, was unspeakably disgraceful. He was an imbecile. He had no common sense. With all his captivating charm, he could not be relied upon not to make himself ridiculous, tragically ridiculous. Compare him with Mr Chirac! She leaned despairingly on the table. She would not undress. She would not move. She had to realize her position; she had to see it.

Folly! Folly! Fancy a commercial traveller throwing a compromising piece of paper to the daughter of his customer in the shop itself: that was the incredible folly with which their relations had begun! And his mad gesture at the pit-shaft! And his scheme for bringing her to Paris unmarried! And then tonight! Monstrous folly! Alone in the bedroom she was a wise and disillusioned woman, wiser than any of those dolls in the restaurant.

And had she not gone to Gerald, as it were, over the dead body of her father, through lies and lies and again lies? That was how she phrased it to herself . . . Over the dead body of her father! How could such a venture succeed? How could she ever have hoped that it would succeed? In that moment she saw her acts with the terrible vision of a Hebrew prophet.

She thought of the Square and of her life there with her mother and Constance. Never would her pride allow her to return to that life, not even if the worst happened to her that could happen. She was one of those who are prepared to pay without grumbling for what they have had.

There was a sound outside. She noticed that the dawn had begun. The door opened and disclosed Gerald.

They exchanged a searching glance, and Gerald shut the door. Gerald infected the air, but she perceived at once that he was sobered. His lip was bleeding.

"Mr Chirac brought me home," she said.

"So it seems," said Gerald, curtly. "I asked you to wait for me. Didn't I say I should come back?"

He was adopting the injured magisterial tone of the man who is ridiculously trying to conceal from himself and others that he has recently behaved like an ass.

She resented the injustice. "I don't think you need talk like that," she said.

"Like what?" he bullied her, determined that she should be in the wrong.

And what a hard look on his pretty face!

Her prudence bade her accept the injustice. She was his. Rapt away from her own world, she was utterly dependent on his good nature.

"I knocked my chin against the damned balustrade, coming upstairs," said Gerald, gloomily.

She knew that was a lie. "Did you?" she replied kindly. "Let me bathe it."

CHAPTER III

AN AMBITION SATISFIED

I

She went to sleep in misery. All the glory of her new life had been eclipsed. But when she woke up, a few hours later, in the large, velvety stateliness of the bedroom for which Gerald was paying so fantastic a price

per day, she was in a brighter mood, and very willing to reconsider her verdicts. Her pride induced her to put Gerald in the right and herself in the wrong, for she was too proud to admit that she had married a charming and irresponsible fool. And, indeed, ought she not to put herself in the wrong? Gerald had told her to wait, and she had not waited. He had said that he should return to the restaurant, and he had returned. Why had she not waited? She had not waited because she had behaved like a simpleton. She had been terrified about nothing. Had she not been frequenting restaurants now for a month past? Ought not a married woman to be capable of waiting an hour in a restaurant for her lawful husband without looking a ninny? And as for Gerald's behaviour, how could he have acted differently? The other Englishman was obviously a brute and had sought a quarrel. His contradiction of Gerald's statements was extremely offensive. On being invited by the brute to go outside, what could Gerald do but comply? Not to have complied might have meant a fight in the restaurant, as the brute was certainly drunk. Compared to the brute, Gerald was not at all drunk, merely a little gay and talkative. Then Gerald's fib about his chin was natural; he simply wished to minimize the fuss and to spare her feelings. It was, in fact, just like Gerald to keep perfect silence as to what had passed between himself and the brute. However, she was convinced that Gerald, so lithe and quick, had given that great brute with his supercilious ways as good as he received, if not better.

And if she were a man and had asked her wife to wait in a restaurant, and the wife had gone home under the escort of another man, she would most assuredly be much more angry than Gerald had been. She was very glad that she had controlled herself and exercised a meek diplomacy. A quarrel had thus been avoided. Yes, the finish of the evening could not be called a quarrel; after her nursing of his chin, nothing but a slight coolness on his part had persisted.

She arose silently and began to dress, full of a determination to treat Gerald as a good wife ought to treat a husband. Gerald did not stir; he was an excellent sleeper: one of those organisms that never want to go to bed and never want to get up. When her toilet was complete save for her bodice, there was a knock at the door. She started.

"Gerald!" She approached the bed, and leaned her nude bosom over her husband, and put her arms round his neck. This method of being brought back to consciousness did not displease him.

The knock was repeated. He gave a grunt.

"Someone's knocking at the door," she whispered.

"Then why don't you open it?" he asked dreamily.

"I'm not dressed, darling."

He looked at her. "Stick something on your shoulders, girl!" said he. "What does it matter?"

There she was, being a simpleton again, despite her resolution!

She obeyed, and cautiously opened the door, standing behind it.

A middle-aged whiskered servant, in a long white apron, announced matters in French which passed her understanding. But Gerald had heard from the bed, and he replied.

"Bien, monsieur!" The servant departed, with a bow, down the obscure corridor.

"It's Chirac," Gerald explained when she had shut the door. "I was forgetting I asked him to come and have lunch with us, early. He's waiting in the drawing-room. Just put your bodice on, and go and talk to him till I come."

He jumped out of bed, and then, standing in his night-garb, stretched himself and terrifically yawned.

"Me?" Sophia questioned.

"Who else?" said Gerald with that curious satiric dryness which he would sometimes import into his tone.

"But I can't speak French!" she protested.

"I didn't suppose you could," said Gerald, with an increase of dryness; "but you know as well as I do that he can speak English."

"Oh, very well, then!" she murmured with agreeable alacrity.

Evidently Gerald had not yet quite recovered from his legitimate displeasure of the night. He minutely examined his mouth in the glass of the Louis Philippe wardrobe. It showed scarcely a trace of battle.

"I say!" he stopped her, as, nervous at the prospect before her, she was leaving the room. "I was thinking of going to Auxerre today."

"Auxerre?" she repeated, wondering under what circumstances she had recently heard that name. Then she remembered: it was the place of execution of the murderer Rivain.

"Yes," he said. "Chirac has to go. He's on a newspaper now. He was an architect when I knew him. He's got to go and he thinks himself jolly lucky. So I thought I'd go with him."

The truth was that he had definitely arranged to go.

"Not to see the execution?" she stammered.

"Why not? I've always wanted to see an execution, especially with the guillotine. And executions are public in France. It's quite the proper thing to go to them."

"But why do you want to see an execution?"

"It just happens that I do want to see an execution. It's a fancy of mine, that's all. I don't know that any reason is necessary," he said, pouring out water into the diminutive ewer.

She was aghast. "And shall you leave me here alone?"

"Well," said he, "I don't see why my being married should prevent me from doing something that I've always wanted to do. Do you?"

"Oh *no*!" she eagerly concurred.

"That's all right," he said. "You can do exactly as you like. Either stay here, or come with me. If you go to Auxerre there's no need at all for you to see the execution. It's an interesting old town—cathedral and so on. But of course if you can't bear to be in the same town as a guillotine, I'll go alone. I shall come back tomorrow."

It was plain where his wish lay. She stopped the phrases that came to her lips, and did her best to dismiss the thoughts which prompted them.

"Of course I'll go," she said quietly. She hesitated, and then went up to the washstand and kissed a part of his cheek that was not soapy. That kiss, which comforted and somehow reassured her, was the expression of a surrender whose monstrousness she would not admit to herself.

In the rich and dusty drawing-room Chirac and Chirac's exquisite formalities awaited her. Nobody else was there.

"My husband . . ." she began, smiling and blushing. She liked Chirac.

It was the first time she had had the opportunity of using that word to other than a servant. It soothed her and gave her confidence. She perceived after a few moments that Chirac did genuinely admire her; more, that she inspired him with something that resembled awe. Speaking very slowly and distinctly she said that she should travel with her husband to Auxerre, as he saw no objection to that course; implying that if he saw no objection she was perfectly satisfied. Chirac was concurrence itself. In five minutes it seemed to be the most natural and proper thing in the world that, on her honeymoon, she should be going with her husband to a particular town because a notorious murderer was about to be decapitated there in public.

"My husband has always wanted to see an execution," she said, later. "It would be a pity to . . ."

"As psychological experience," replied Chirac, pronouncing the *p* of the adjective, "it will be very *intéressant* . . . To observe one's self, in such circumstances . . ." He smiled enthusiastically.

She thought how strange even nice Frenchmen were. Imagine going to an execution in order to observe yourself!

II

What continually impressed Sophia as strange, in the behaviour not only of Gerald but of Chirac and other people with whom she came into contact, was its quality of casualness. She had all her life been accustomed to see enterprises, even minor ones, well pondered and then carefully schemed beforehand. In St Luke's Square there was always, in every head, a sort of time-table of existence prepared at least one week in advance. But in Gerald's world nothing was prearranged. Elaborate affairs were decided in a moment and undertaken with extraordinary lightness. Thus the excursion to Auxerre! During lunch scarcely a word was said as to it; the conversation, in English for Sophia's advantage, turning, as usual under such circumstances, upon the difficulty of languages and the differences between countries. Nobody would have guessed that any member of the party had any preoccupation whatever for the rest of the day. The meal was delightful to Sophia; not merely did she find Chirac comfortingly kind and sincere, but Gerald was restored to the perfection of his charm and his good humour. Then suddenly, in the midst of coffee, the question of trains loomed up like a swift crisis. In five minutes Chirac had departed—whether to his office or his home Sophia did not understand—and within a quarter of an hour she and Gerald were driving rapidly to the Gare de Lyon, Gerald stuffing into his pocket a large envelope full of papers which he had received by registered post. They caught the train by about a minute, and Chirac by a few seconds. Yet neither he nor Gerald seemed to envisage the risk of inconvenience and annoyance which they had incurred and escaped. Chirac chattered through the window with another journalist in the next compartment. When she had leisure to examine him, Sophia saw that he must have called at his home to put on old clothes. Everybody except herself and Gerald seemed to travel in his oldest clothes.

The train was hot, noisy, and dusty. But, one after another, all three of them fell asleep and slept heavily, calmly, like healthy and exhausted young animals. Nothing could disturb them for more than a moment. To Sophia it appeared to be by simple chance that Chirac aroused himself and them at Laroche and sleepily seized her valise and got them all on the platform, where they yawned and smiled, full of the deep, half-realized satisfaction of repose. They drank nectar from a wheeled buffet, drank it eagerly, in thirsty gulps, and sighed with pleasure and relief, and Gerald threw down a coin, refusing change with a lord's gesture. The local train to Auxerre was full, and with a varied and sinister cargo. At length they were in the zone of the waiting guillotine. The rumour ran that the executioner was on the train. No one had seen him; no one was sure of recognizing him, but everyone hugged the belief that he was on the train. Although the sun was sinking the heat seemed not to abate. Attitudes grew more limp, more abandoned. Soot and prickly dust flew in unceasingly at the open windows. The train stopped at Bonnard, Chemilly, and Moneteau, each time before a waiting crowd that invaded it. And at last, in the great station at Auxerre, it poured out an incredible mass of befouled humanity that spread over everything like an inundation. Sophia was frightened. Gerald left the

initiative to Chirac, and Chirac took her arm and led her forward, looking behind him to see that Gerald followed with the valise. Frenzy seemed to reign in Auxerre.

The driver of a cab demanded ten francs for transporting them to the Hotel de l'Épée.

"Bah!" scornfully exclaimed Chirac, in his quality of experienced Parisian who is not to be exploited by heavy-witted provincials.

But the driver of the next cab demanded twelve francs.

"Jump in," said Gerald to Sophia. Chirac lifted his eyebrows.

At the same moment a tall, stout man with the hard face of a flourishing scoundrel, and a young, pallid girl on his arm, pushed aside both Gerald and Chirac and got into the cab with his companion.

Chirac protested, telling him that the cab was already engaged.

The usurper scowled and swore, and the young girl laughed boldly.

Sophia, shrinking, expected her escort to execute justice heroic and final; but she was disappointed.

"Brute!" murmured Chirac, and shrugged his shoulders as the carriage drove off, leaving them foolish on the kerb.

By this time all the other cabs had been seized. They walked to the Hotel de l'Épée, jostled by the crowd, Sophia and Chirac in front, and Gerald following with the valise, whose weight caused him to lean over to the right and his left arm to rise. The avenue was long, straight, and misty with a floating dust. Sophia had a vivid sense of the romantic. They saw towers and spires, and Chirac talked to her slowly and carefully of the cathedral and the famous churches. He said that the stained glass was marvellous, and with much care he catalogued for her all the things she must visit. They crossed a river. She felt as though she was stepping into the middle age. At intervals Gerald changed the valise from hand to hand; obstinately, he would not let Chirac touch it. They struggled upwards, through narrow curving streets.

"Voilà!" said Chirac.

They were in front of the Hotel de l'Épée. Across the street was a café crammed with people. Several carriages stood in front. The Hotel de l'Épée had a reassuring air of mellow respectability, such as Chirac had claimed for it. He had suggested this hotel for Madame Scales because it was not near the place of execution. Gerald had said, "Of course! Of course!" Chirac, who did not mean to go to bed, required no room for himself.

The Hotel de l'Épée had one room to offer, at the price of twenty-five francs.

Gerald revolted at the attempted imposition. "A nice thing!" he grumbled, "that ordinary travellers can't get a decent room at a decent price just because someone's going to be guillotined tomorrow! We'll try elsewhere!"

His features expressed disgust, but Sophia fancied that he was secretly pleased.

They swaggered out of the busy stir of the hotel, as those must who, having declined to be swindled, wish to preserve their importance in the face of the world. In the street a cabman solicited them, and filled them with hope by saying that he knew of an hotel that might suit them and would drive them there for five francs. He furiously lashed his horse. The mere fact of being in a swiftly moving carriage which wayfarers had to avoid nimbly, maintained their spirits. They had a near glimpse of the cathedral. The cab halted with a bump, in a small square, in front of a repellent building which bore the sign, "Hotel de Vézelay." The horse was bleeding. Gerald instructed Sophia to remain where she was, and he and Chirac went up four stone steps into the hotel. Sophia, stared at by loose crowds that were promenading, gazed about her, and saw that all the windows of the square were open and most of them occupied by people who laughed and chattered. Then there was a shout: Gerald's voice. He had appeared at a window on the second floor of the hotel with Chirac and a very fat woman. Chirac saluted, and Gerald laughed carelessly, and nodded.

"It's all right," said Gerald, having descended.

"How much do they ask?" Sophia inquired indiscreetly.

Gerald hesitated, and looked self-conscious. "Thirty-five francs," he said. "But I've had enough of driving about. It seems we're lucky to get it even at that."

And Chirac shrugged his shoulders as if to indicate that the situation and the price ought to be accepted philosophically. Gerald gave the driver five francs. He examined the piece and demanded a pourboire.

"Oh! Damn!" said Gerald, and, because he had no smaller change, parted with another two francs.

"Is anyone coming out for this damned valise?" Gerald demanded, like a tyrant whose wrath would presently fall, if the populace did not instantly set about minding their p's and q's.

But nobody emerged, and he was compelled to carry the bag himself.

The hotel was dark and malodorous, and every room seemed to be crowded with giggling groups of drinkers.

"We can't both sleep in this bed, surely," said Sophia when, Chirac having remained downstairs, she faced Gerald in a small, mean bedroom.

"You don't suppose I shall go to bed, do you?" said Gerald, rather brusquely. "It's for you. We're going to eat now. Look sharp."

III

It was night. She lay in the narrow, crimson-draped bed. The heavy crimson curtains had been drawn across the dirty lace curtains of the window, but the lights of the little square faintly penetrated through chinks into the room. The sounds of the square also penetrated, extraordinarily loud and clear, for the unabated heat had compelled her to leave the window open. She could not sleep. Exhausted though she was, there was no hope of her being able to sleep.

Once again she was profoundly depressed. She remembered the dinner with horror. The long, crowded table, with semicircular ends, in the oppressive and reeking dining-room lighted by oil-lamps! There must have been at least forty people at that table. Most of them ate disgustingly, as noisily as pigs, with the ends of the large coarse napkins tucked in at their necks. All the service was done by the fat woman whom she had seen at the window with Gerald, and a young girl whose demeanour was candidly brazen. Both these creatures were slatterns. Everything was dirty. But the food was good. Chirac and Gerald were agreed that the food was good, as well as the wine. “Remarquable!” Chirac had said, of the wine. Sophia, however, could neither eat nor drink with relish. She was afraid. The company shocked her by its gestures alone. It was very heterogeneous in appearance, some of the diners being well dressed, approaching elegance, and others shabby. But all the faces, to the youngest, were brutalized, corrupt, and shameless. The juxtaposition of old men and young women was odious to her, especially when those pairs kissed, as they did frequently towards the end of the meal. Happily she was placed between Chirac and Gerald. That situation seemed to shelter her even from the conversation. She would have comprehended nothing of the conversation, had it not been for the presence of a middle-aged Englishman who sat at the opposite end of the table with a youngish, stylish Frenchwoman whom she had seen at Sylvain’s on the previous night. The Englishman was evidently under a promise to teach English to the Frenchwoman. He kept translating for her into English, slowly and distinctly, and she would repeat the phrases after him, with strange contortions of the mouth.

Thus Sophia gathered that the talk was exclusively about assassinations, executions, criminals, and executioners. Some of the people there made a practice of attending every execution. They were fountains of interesting gossip, and the lions of the meal. There was a woman who could recall the dying words of all the victims of justice for twenty years past. The table roared with hysteric laughter at one of this woman’s anecdotes. Sophia learned that she had related how a criminal had said to the priest who was good-naturedly trying to screen the sight of the guillotine from him with his body: “Stand away now, parson. Haven’t I paid to see it?” Such was the Englishman’s rendering. The wages of the executioners and their assistants were discussed, and differences of opinion led to ferocious arguments. A young and dandiacal fellow told, as a fact which he was ready to vouch for with a pistol, how Cora Pearl, the renowned English courtesan, had through her influence over a prefect of police succeeded in visiting a criminal alone in his cell during the night preceding his execution, and had only quitted him an hour before the final summons. The tale won the honours of the dinner. It was regarded as truly impressive, and inevitably it led to the general inquiry: what could the highest personages in the empire see to admire in that red-haired Englishwoman? And of course Rivain himself, the handsome homicide, the centre and hero of the fête, was never long out of the conversation. Several of the diners had seen him; one or two knew him and could give amazing details of his prowess as a man of pleasure. Despite his crime, he seemed to be the object of sincere idolatry. It was said positively that a niece of his victim had been promised a front place at the execution.

Apropos of this, Sophia gathered, to her intense astonishment and alarm, that the prison was close by and that the execution would take place at the corner of the square itself in which the hotel was situated. Gerald must have known; he had hidden it from her. She regarded him sideways, with distrust. As the dinner finished, Gerald’s pose of a calm, disinterested, scientific observer of humanity gradually broke down. He could not maintain it in front of the increasing license of the scene round the table. He was at length somewhat ashamed of having exposed his wife to the view of such an orgy; his restless glance carefully avoided both Sophia find Chirac. The latter, whose unaffected simplicity of interest in the affair had more than anything helped to keep Sophia in countenance, observed the change in Gerald and Sophia’s excessive discomfort, and suggested that they should leave the table without waiting for the coffee. Gerald agreed quickly. Thus had Sophia been released from the horror of the dinner. She did not understand how a man so thoughtful and kindly as Chirac—he had bidden her good night with the most distinguished courtesy—could tolerate, much less plea, surably savour, the gluttonous, drunken, and salacious debauchery of the Hotel de Vézelay; but his theory was, so far as she could judge from his imperfect English, that whatever existed might be admitted and examined by serious persons interested in the study of human nature. His face seemed to say: “Why not?” His face seemed to say to Gerald and to herself: “If this incommodes you, what did you come for?”

Gerald had left her at the bedroom door with a self-conscious nod. She had partly undressed and lain down, and instantly the hotel had transformed itself into a kind of sounding-box. It was as if, beneath and within all the noises of the square, every movement in the hotel reached her ears through cardboard walls: distant shoutings and laughter below; rattlings of crockery below; stampings up and down stairs; stealthy creepings up and down stairs; brusque calls; fragments of song, whisperings; long sighs suddenly stifled; mysterious groans as of torture, broken by a giggle; quarrels and bickerings—she was spared nothing in the strangely resonant darkness.

Then there came out of the little square a great uproar and commotion, with shrieks, and under the shrieks a confused din. In vain she pressed her face into the pillow and listened to the irregular, prodigious noise of her eyelashes as they scraped the rough linen. The thought had somehow introduced itself into her head that she must arise and go to the window and see all that was to be seen. She resisted. She said to herself that the idea was absurd, that she did not *wish* to go to the window. Nevertheless, while arguing with herself, she well knew that resistance to the thought was useless and that ultimately her legs would obey its command.

When ultimately she yielded to the fascination and went to the window and pulled aside one of the curtains, she had a feeling of relief.

The cool, grey beginnings of dawn were in the sky, and every detail of the square was visible. Without exception all the windows were wide open and filled with sightseers. In the background of many windows were burning candles or lamps that the far-distant approach of the sun was already killing. In front of these, on the frontier of two mingling lights, the attentive figures of the watchers were curiously silhouetted. On the red-tiled roofs, too, was a squatted population. Below, a troop of gendarmes, mounted on caracoling horses stretched in line across the square, was gradually sweeping the entire square of a packed, gesticulating, cursing crowd. The operation of this immense besom was very slow. As the spaces of the square were cleared they began to be dotted by privileged persons, journalists or law officers or their friends, who walked to and fro in conscious pride; among them Sophia descried Gerald and Chirac, strolling arm-in-arm and talking to two elaborately clad girls, who were also arm-in-arm.

Then she saw a red reflection coming from one of the side streets of which she had a vista; it was the swinging lantern of a waggon drawn by a gaunt grey horse. The vehicle stopped at the end of the square from which the besom had started, and it was immediately surrounded by the privileged, who, however, were soon persuaded to stand away. The crowd, amassed now at the principal inlets of the square, gave a formidable cry and burst into the refrain—

> “Le voilà!
> Nicolas!
> Ah! Ah! Ah!”

The clamour became furious as a group of workmen in blue blouses drew piece by piece all the components of the guillotine from the waggon and laid them carefully on the ground, under the superintendence of a man in a black frock-coat and a silk hat with broad flat brim; a little fussy man of nervous gestures. And presently the red columns had risen upright from the ground and were joined at the top by an acrobatic climber. As each part was bolted and screwed to the growing machine the man in the high hat carefully tested it. In a short time that seemed very long, the guillotine was finished save for the triangular steel blade which lay shining on the ground, a cynosure. The executioner pointed to it, and two men picked it up and slipped it into its groove, and hoisted it to the summit of the machine. The executioner peered at it interminably amid a universal silence. Then he actuated the mechanism, and the mass of metal fell with a muffled, reverberating thud. There were a few faint shrieks, blended together, and then an overpowering racket of cheers, shouts, hootings, and fragments of song. The blade was again lifted, instantly reproducing silence, and again it fell, liberating a new bedlam. The executioner made a movement of satisfaction. Many women at the windows clapped enthusiastically, and the gendarmes had to fight brutally against the fierce pressure of the crowd. The workmen doffed their blouses and put on coats, and Sophia was disturbed to see them coming in single file towards the hotel, followed by the executioner in the silk hat.

IV

There was a tremendous opening of doors in the Hotel de Vézelay, and much whispering on thresholds, as the executioner and his band entered solemnly. Sophia heard them tramp upstairs; they seemed to hesitate, and then apparently went into a room on the same landing as hers. A door banged. But Sophia could hear the regular sound of new voices talking, and then the rattling of glasses on a tray. The conversation which came to her from the windows of the hotel now showed a great increase of excitement. She could not see the people at these neighbouring windows without showing her own head, and this she would not do. The boom of a heavy bell striking the hour vibrated over the roofs of the square; she supposed that it might be the cathedral clock. In a corner of the square she saw Gerald talking vivaciously alone with one of the two girls who had been together. She wondered vaguely how such a girl had been brought up, and what her parents thought—or knew! And she was conscious of an intense pride in herself, of a measureless haughty feeling of superiority.

Her eye caught the guillotine again, and was held by it. Guarded by gendarmes, that tall and simple object did most menacingly dominate the square with its crude red columns. Tools and a large open box lay on the ground beside it. The enfeebled horse in the waggon had an air of dozing on his twisted legs. Then the first rays of the sun shot lengthwise across the square at the level of the chimneys; and Sophia noticed that nearly all the lamps and candles had been extinguished. Many people at the windows were yawning; they laughed foolishly after they had yawned. Some were eating and drinking. Some were shouting conversations from one

house to another. The mounted gendarmes were still pressing back the feverish crowds that growled at all the inlets to the square. She saw Chirac walking to and fro alone. But she could not find Gerald. He could not have left the square. Perhaps he had returned to the hotel and would come up to see if she was comfortable or if she needed anything. Guiltily she sprang back into bed. When last she had surveyed the room it had been dark; now it was bright and every detail stood clear. Yet she had the sensation of having been at the window only a few minutes.

She waited. But Gerald did not come. She could hear chiefly the steady hum of the voices of the executioner and his aids. She reflected that the room in which they were must be at the back. The other sounds in the hotel grew less noticeable. Then, after an age, she heard a door open, and a low voice say something commandingly in French, and then a "Oui, monsieur," and a general descent of the stairs. The executioner and his aids were leaving. "You," cried a drunken English voice from an upper floor—it was the middle-aged Englishman translating what the executioner had said—"you, you will take the head." Then a rough laugh, and the repeating voice of the Englishman's girl, still pursuing her studies in English: "You will take ze 'ead. Yess, sair." And another laugh. At length quiet reigned in the hotel. Sophia said to herself: "I won't stir from this bed till it's all over and Gerald comes back!"

She dozed, under the sheet, and was awakened by a tremendous shrieking, growling, and yelling: a phenomenon of human bestiality that far surpassed Sophia's narrow experiences. Shut up though she was in a room, perfectly secure, the mad fury of that crowd, balked at the inlets to the square, thrilled and intimidated her. It sounded as if they would be capable of tearing the very horses to pieces. "I must stay where I am," she murmured. And even while saying it she rose and went to the window again and peeped out. The torture involved was extreme, but she had not sufficient force within her to resist the fascination. She stared greedily into the bright square. The first thing she saw was Gerald coming out of a house opposite, followed after a few seconds by the girl with whom he had previously been talking. Gerald glanced hastily up at the façade of the hotel, and then approached as near as he could to the red columns, in front of which were now drawn up a line of gendarmes with naked swords. A second and larger wagon, with two horses, waited by the side of the other one. The racket beyond the square continued and even grew louder. But the couple of hundred persons within the cordons, and all the inhabitants of the windows, drunk and sober, gazed in a fixed and sinister enchantment at the region of the guillotine, as Sophia gazed. "I cannot stand this!" she told herself in horror, but she could not move; she could not move even her eyes.

At intervals the crowd would burst out in a violent staccato—

> "Le voilà!
> Nicolas!
> Ah! Ah! Ah!"

And the final "Ah" was devilish.

Then a gigantic passionate roar, the culmination of the mob's fierce savagery, crashed against the skies. The line of maddened horses swerved and reared, and seemed to fall on the furious multitude while the statue-like gendarmes rocked over them. It was a last effort to break the cordon, and it failed.

From the little street at the rear of the guillotine appeared a priest, walking backwards and holding a crucifix high in his right hand, and behind him came the handsome hero, his body all crossed with cords, between two warders, who pressed against him and supported him on either side. He was certainly very young. He lifted his chin gallantly, but his face was incredibly white. Sophia discerned that the priest was trying to hide the sight of the guillotine from the prisoner with his body, just as in the story which she had heard at dinner.

Except the voice of the priest, indistinctly rising and falling in the prayer for the dying, there was no sound in the square or its environs. The windows were now occupied by groups turned to stone with distended eyes fixed on the little procession. Sophia had a tightening of the throat, and the hand trembled by which she held the curtain. The central figure did not seem to her to be alive; but rather a doll, a marionette wound up to imitate the action of a tragedy. She saw the priest offer the crucifix to the mouth of the marionette, which with a clumsy unhuman shoving of its corded shoulders butted the thing away. And as the procession turned and stopped she could plainly see that the marionette's nape and shoulders were bare, his shirt having been slit. It was horrible. "Why do I stay here?" she asked herself hysterically. But she did not stir. The victim had disappeared now in the midst of a group of men. Then she perceived him prone under the red column, between the grooves. The silence was now broken only by the tinkling of the horses' bits in the corners of the square. The line of gendarmes in front of the scaffold held their swords tightly and looked over their noses, ignoring the privileged groups that peered almost between their shoulders.

And Sophia waited, horror-struck. She saw nothing but the gleaming triangle of metal that was suspended high above the prone, attendant victim. She felt like a lost soul, torn too soon from shelter, and exposed for ever to the worst hazards of destiny. Why was she in this strange, incomprehensible town, foreign and inimical to her, watching with agonized glance this cruel, obscene spectacle? Her sensibilities were all a bleeding mass of wounds. Why? Only yesterday, and she had been an innocent, timid creature in Bursley, in

Axe, a foolish creature who deemed the concealment of letters a supreme excitement. Either that day or this day was not real. Why was she imprisoned alone in that odious, indescribably odious hotel, with no one to soothe and comfort her, and carry her away?

The distant bell boomed once. Then a monosyllabic voice sounded, sharp, low, nervous; she recognized the voice of the executioner, whose name she had heard but could not remember. There was a clicking noise . . .

She shrank down to the floor in terror and loathing, and hid her face, and shuddered. Shriek after shriek, from various windows, rang on her ears in a fusillade; and then the mad yell of the penned crowd, which, like herself, had not seen but had heard, extinguished all other noise. Justice was done. The great ambition of Gerald's life was at last satisfied.

V

Later, amid the stir of the hotel, there came a knock at her door, impatient and nervous. Forgetting, in her tribulation, that she was without her bodice, she got up from the floor in a kind of miserable dream, and opened. Chirac stood on the landing, and he had Gerald by the arm. Chirac looked worn out, curiously fragile and pathetic; but Gerald was the very image of death. The attainment of ambition had utterly destroyed his equilibrium; his curiosity had proved itself stronger than his stomach. Sophia would have pitied him had she in that moment been capable of pity. Gerald staggered past her into the room, and sank with a groan on to the bed. Not long since he had been proudly conversing with impudent women. Now, in swift collapse, he was as flaccid as a sick hound and as disgusting as an aged drunkard.

"He is some little *souffrant,*" said Chirac, weakly.

Sophia perceived in Chirac's tone the assumption that of course her present duty was to devote herself to the task of restoring her shamed husband to his manly pride.

"And what about me?" she thought bitterly.

The fat woman ascended the stairs like a tottering blancmange, and began to gabble to Sophia, who understood nothing whatever.

"She wants sixty francs," Chirac said, and in answer to Sophia's startled question, he explained that Gerald had agreed to pay a hundred francs for the room, which was the landlady's own—fifty francs in advance and the fifty after the execution. The other ten was for the dinner. The landlady, distrusting the whole of her *clientèle,* was collecting her accounts instantly on the completion of the spectacle.

Sophia made no remark as to Gerald's lie to her. Indeed, Chirac had heard it. She knew Gerald for a glib liar to others, but she was naïvely surprised when he practised upon herself.

"Gerald! Do you hear?" she said coldly.

The amateur of severed heads only groaned.

With a movement of irritation she went to him and felt in his pockets for his purse; he acquiesced, still groaning. Chirac helped her to choose and count the coins.

The fat woman, appeased, pursued her way.

"Good-bye, madame!" said Chirac, with his customary courtliness, transforming the landing of the hideous hotel into some imperial antechamber.

"Are you going away?" she asked, in surprise. Her distress was so obvious that it tremendously flattered him. He would have stayed if he could. But he had to return to Paris to write and deliver his article.

"Tomorrow, I hope!" he murmured sympathetically, kissing her hand. The gesture atoned somewhat for the sordidness of her situation, and even corrected the faults of her attire. Always afterwards it seemed to her that Chirac was an old and intimate friend; he had successfully passed through the ordeal of seeing "the wrong side" of the stuff of her life.

She shut the door on him with a lingering glance, and reconciled herself to her predicament.

Gerald slept. Just as he was, he slept heavily.

This was what he had brought her to, then! The horrors of the night, of the dawn, and of the morning! Ineffable suffering and humiliation; anguish and torture that could never be forgotten! And after a fatuous vigil of unguessed license, he had tottered back, an offensive beast, to sleep the day away in that filthy chamber! He did not possess even enough spirit to play the *rôle* of roysterer to the end. And she was bound to him; far, far from any other human aid; cut off irrevocably by her pride from those who perhaps would have protected her from his dangerous folly. The deep conviction henceforward formed a permanent part of her general consciousness that he was simply an irresponsible and thoughtless fool! He was without *sense*. Such was her brilliant and godlike husband, the man who had given her the right to call herself a married woman! He was a fool. With all her ignorance of the world she could see that nobody but an arrant imbecile could have brought her to the present pass. Her native sagacity revolted. Gusts of feeling came over her in which she could have thrashed him into the realization of his responsibilities.

Sticking out of the breast pocket of his soiled coat was the packet which he had received on the previous day. If he had not already lost it, he could only thank his luck. She took it. There were English bank-notes in it for two hundred pounds, a letter from a banker, and other papers. With precautions against noise she tore the envelope and the letter and papers into small pieces, and then looked about for a place to hide them. A

cupboard suggested itself. She got on a chair, and pushed the fragments out of sight on the topmost shelf, where they may well be to this day. She finished dressing, and then sewed the notes into the lining of her skirt. She had no silly, delicate notions about stealing. She obscurely felt that, in the care of a man like Gerald, she might find herself in the most monstrous, the most impossible dilemmas. Those notes, safe and secret in her skirt, gave her confidence, reassured her against the perils of the future, and endowed her with independence. The act was characteristic of her enterprise and of her fundamental prudence. It approached the heroic. And her conscience hotly defended its righteousness.

She decided that when he discovered his loss, she would merely deny all knowledge of the envelope, for he had not spoken a word to her about it. He never mentioned the details of money; he had a fortune. However, the necessity for this untruth did not occur. He made no reference whatever to his loss. The fact was, he thought he had been careless enough to let the envelope be filched from him during the excess of the night.

All day till evening Sophia sat on a dirty chair, without food, while Gerald slept. She kept repeating to herself, in amazed resentment: “A hundred francs for this room! A hundred francs! And he hadn’t the pluck to tell me!” She could not have expressed her contempt.

Long before sheer ennui forced her to look out of the window again, every sign of justice had been removed from the square. Nothing whatever remained in the heavy August sunshine save gathered heaps of filth where the horses had reared and caracoled.

CHAPTER IV

A CRISIS FOR GERALD

I

For a time there existed in the minds of both Gerald and Sophia the remarkable notion that twelve thousand pounds represented the infinity of wealth, that this sum possessed special magical properties which rendered it insensible to the process of subtraction. It seemed impossible that twelve thousand pounds, while continually getting less, could ultimately quite disappear. The notion lived longer in the mind of Gerald than in that of Sophia; for Gerald would never look at a disturbing fact, whereas Sophia’s gaze was morbidly fascinated by such phenomena. In a life devoted to travel and pleasure Gerald meant not to spend more than six hundred a year, the interest on his fortune. Six hundred a year is less than two pounds a day, yet Gerald never paid less than two pounds a day in hotel bills alone. He hoped that he was living on a thousand a year, had a secret fear that he might be spending fifteen hundred, and was really spending about two thousand five hundred. Still, the remarkable notion of the inexhaustibility of twelve thousand pounds always reassured him. The faster the money went, the more vigorously this notion flourished in Gerald’s mind. When twelve had unaccountably dwindled to three, Gerald suddenly decided that he must act, and in a few months he lost two thousand on the Paris Bourse. The adventure frightened him, and in his panic he scattered a couple of hundred in a frenzy of high living.

But even with only twenty thousand francs left out of three hundred thousand, he held closely to the belief that natural laws would in his case somehow be suspended. He had heard of men who were once rich begging bread and sweeping crossings, but he felt quite secure against such risks, by simple virtue of the axiom that he was he. However, he meant to assist the axiom by efforts to earn money. When these continued to fail, he tried to assist the axiom by borrowing money; but he found that his uncle had definitely done with him. He would have assisted the axiom by stealing money, but he had neither the nerve nor the knowledge to be a swindler; he was not even sufficiently expert to cheat at cards.

He had thought in thousands. Now he began to think in hundreds, in tens, daily and hourly. He paid two hundred francs in railway fares in order to live economically in a village, and shortly afterwards another two hundred francs in railway fares in order to live economically in Paris. And to celebrate the arrival in Paris and the definite commencement of an era of strict economy and serious search for a livelihood, he spent a hundred francs on a dinner at the Maison Dorée and two balcony stalls at the Gymnase. In brief, he omitted nothing—no act, no resolve, no self-deception—of the typical fool in his situation; always convinced that his difficulties and his wisdom were quite exceptional.

In May 1870, on an afternoon, he was ranging nervously to and fro in a three-cornered bedroom of a little

hotel at the angle of the Rue Fontaine and the Rue Laval (now the Rue Victor Massé), within half a minute of the Boulevard de Clichy. It had come to that—an exchange of the "grand boulevard" for the "boulevard extérieur"! Sophia sat on a chair at the grimy window, glancing down in idle disgust of life at the Clichy-Odéon omnibus which was casting off its tip-horse at the corner of the Rue Chaptal. The noise of petty, hurried traffic over the bossy paving stones was deafening. The locality was not one to correspond with an ideal. There was too much humanity crowded into those narrow hilly streets; humanity seemed to be bulging out at the windows of the high houses. Gerald healed his pride by saying that this was, after all, the real Paris, and that the cookery was as good as could be got anywhere, pay what you would. He seldom ate a meal in the little salons on the first floor without becoming ecstatic upon the cookery. To hear him, he might have chosen the hotel on its superlative merits, without regard to expense. And with his air of use and custom, he did indeed look like a connoisseur of Paris who knew better than to herd with vulgar tourists in the pens of the Madeleine quarter. He was dressed with some distinction; good clothes, when put to the test, survive a change of fortune, as a Roman arch survives the luxury of departed empire. Only his collar, large V-shaped front, and wrist-bands, which bore the ineffaceable signs of cheap laundering, reflected the shadow of impending disaster.

He glanced sideways, stealthily, at Sophia. She, too, was still dressed with distinction; in the robe of black *faille,* the cashmere shawl, and the little black hat with its falling veil, there was no apparent symptom of beggary. She would have been judged as one of those women who content themselves with few clothes but good, and, greatly aided by nature, make a little go a long way. Good black will last for eternity; it discloses no secrets of modification and mending, and it is not transparent.

At last Gerald, resuming a suspended conversation, said as it were doggedly:

"I tell you I haven't got five francs altogether! and you can feel my pockets if you like," added the habitual liar in him, fearing incredulity.

"Well, and what do you expect *me* to do?" Sophia inquired.

The accent, at once ironic and listless, in which she put this question, showed that strange and vital things had happened to Sophia in the four years which had elapsed since her marriage. It did really seem to her, indeed, that the Sophia whom Gerald had espoused was dead and gone, and that another Sophia had come into her body: so intensely conscious was she of a fundamental change in herself under the stress of continuous experience. And though this was but a seeming, though she was still the same Sophia more fully disclosed, it was a true seeming. Indisputably more beautiful than when Gerald had unwillingly made her his legal wife, she was now nearly twenty-four, and looked perhaps somewhat older than her age. Her frame was firmly set, her waist thicker, neither slim nor stout. The lips were rather hard, and she had a habit of tightening her mouth, on the same provocation as sends a snail into its shell. No trace was left of immature gawkiness in her gestures or of simplicity in her intonations. She was a woman of commanding and slightly arrogant charm, not in the least degree the charm of innocence and ingenuousness. Her eyes were the eyes of one who has lost her illusions too violently and too completely. Her gaze, coldly comprehending, implied familiarity with the abjectness of human nature. Gerald had begun and had finished her education. He had not ruined her, as a bad professor may ruin a fine voice, because her moral force immeasurably exceeded his; he had unwittingly produced a masterpiece, but it was a tragic masterpiece. Sophia was such a woman as, by a mere glance as she utters an opinion, will make a man say to himself, half in desire and half in alarm lest she reads him too: "By Jove! she must have been through a-thing or two. She knows what people are!"

The marriage was, of course, a calamitous folly. From the very first, from the moment when the commercial traveller had with incomparable rash fatuity thrown the paper pellet over the counter, Sophia's awakening common sense had told her that in yielding to her instinct she was sowing misery and shame for herself: but she had gone on, as if under a spell. It had needed the irretrievableness of flight from home to begin the breaking of the trance. Once fully awakened out of the trance, she had recognized her marriage for what it was. She had made neither the best nor the worst of it. She had accepted Gerald as one accepts a climate. She saw again and again that he was irreclaimably a fool and a prodigy of irresponsibleness. She tolerated him, now with sweetness, now bitterly; accepting always his caprices, and not permitting herself to have wishes of her own. She was ready to pay the price of pride and of a moment's imbecility with a lifetime of self-repression. It was high, but it was the price. She had acquired nothing but an exceptionally good knowledge of the French language (she soon learnt to scorn Gerald's glib maltreatment of the tongue), and she had conserved nothing but her dignity. She knew that Gerald was sick of her, that he would have danced for joy to be rid of her; that he was constantly unfaithful; that he had long since ceased to be excited by her beauty. She knew also that at bottom he was a little afraid of her; here was her sole moral consolation. The thing that sometimes struck her as surprising was that he had not abandoned her, simply and crudely walked off one day and forgotten to take her with him.

They hated each other, but in different ways. She loathed him, and he resented her.

"What do I expect you to do?" he repeated after her. "Why don't you write home to your people and get some money out of them?"

Now that he had said what was in his mind, he faced her with a bullying swagger. Had he been a bigger man he might have tried the effect of physical bullying on her. One of his numerous reasons for resenting her

was that she was the taller of the two.

She made no reply.

"Now you needn't turn pale and begin all that fuss over again. What I'm suggesting is a perfectly reasonable thing. If I haven't got money I haven't got it. I can't invent it."

She perceived that he was ready for one of their periodical tempestuous quarrels. But that day she felt too tired and unwell to quarrel. His warning against a repetition of "fuss" had reference to the gastric dizziness from which she had been suffering for two years. It would take her usually after a meal. She did not swoon, but her head swam and she could not stand. She would sink down wherever she happened to be, and, her face alarmingly white, murmur faintly: "My salts." Within five minutes the attack had gone and left no trace. She had been through one just after lunch. He resented this affection. He detested being compelled to hand the smelling-bottle to her, and he would have avoided doing so if her pallor did not always alarm him. Nothing but this pallor convinced him that the attacks were not a deep ruse to impress him. His attitude invariably implied that she could cure the malady if she chose, but that through obstinacy she did not choose.

"Are you going to have the decency to answer my question, or aren't you?"

"What question?" Her vibrating voice was low and restrained.

"Will you write to your people?"

"For money?"

The sarcasm of her tone was diabolic. She could not have kept the sarcasm out of her tone; she did not attempt to keep it out. She cared little if it whipped him to fury. Did he imagine, seriously, that she would be capable of going on her knees to her family? She? Was he unaware that his wife was the proudest and the most obstinate woman on earth, that all her behaviour to him was the expression of her pride and her obstinacy? Ill and weak though she felt, she marshalled together all the forces of her character to defend her resolve never, never to eat the bread of humiliation. She was absolutely determined to be dead to her family. Certainly, one December, several years previously, she had seen English Christmas cards in an English shop in the Rue de Rivoli, and in a sudden gush of tenderness towards Constance, she had despatched a coloured greeting to Constance and her mother. And having initiated the custom, she had continued it. That was not like asking a kindness; it was bestowing a kindness. But except for the annual card, she was dead to St Luke's Square. She was one of those daughters who disappear and are not discussed in the family circle. The thought of her immense foolishness, the little tender thoughts of Constance, some flitting souvenir, full of unwilling admiration, of a regal gesture of her mother—these things only steeled her against any sort of resurrection after death.

And he was urging her to write home for money! Why, she would not even have paid a visit in splendour to St Luke's Square. Never should they know what she had suffered! And especially her Aunt Harriet, from whom she had stolen!

"Will you write to your people?" he demanded yet again, emphasizing and separating each word.

"No," she said shortly, with terrible disdain.

"Why not?"

"Because I won't." The curling line of her lips, as they closed on each other, said all the rest; all the cruel truths about his unspeakable, inane, coarse follies, his laziness, his excesses, his lies, his deceptions, his bad faith, his truculence, his improvidence, his shameful waste and ruin of his life and hers. She doubted whether he realized his baseness and her wrongs, but if he could not read them in her silent contumely, she was too proud to recite them to him. She had never complained, save in uncontrolled moments of anger.

"If that's the way you're going to talk—all right!" he snapped, furious. Evidently he was baffled.

She kept silence. She was determined to see what he would do in the face of her inaction.

"You know, I'm not joking," he pursued. "We shall starve."

"Very well," she agreed. "We shall starve."

She watched him surreptitiously, and she was almost sure that he really had come to the end of his tether. His voice, which never alone convinced, carried a sort of conviction now. He was penniless. In four years he had squandered twelve thousand pounds, and had nothing to show for it except an enfeebled digestion and a tragic figure of a wife. One small point of satisfaction there was—and all the Baines in her clutched at it and tried to suck satisfaction from it—their manner of travelling about from hotel to hotel had made it impossible for Gerald to run up debts. A few debts he might have, unknown to her, but they could not be serious.

So they looked at one another, in hatred and despair. The inevitable had arrived. For months she had fronted it in bravado, not concealing from herself that it lay in waiting. For years he had been sure that though the inevitable might happen to others it could not happen to him. There it was! He was conscious of a heavy weight in his stomach, and she of a general numbness, enwrapping her fatigue. Even then he could not believe that it was true, this disaster. As for Sophia, she was reconciling herself with bitter philosophy to the eccentricities of fate. Who would have dreamed that she, a young girl brought up, etc.? Her mother could not have improved the occasion more uncompromisingly than Sophia did—behind that disdainful mask.

"Well—if that's it . . . !" Gerald exploded at length, puffing. And he puffed out of the room and was gone in a second.

She languidly picked up a book, the moment Gerald had departed, and tried to prove to herself that she was sufficiently in command of her nerves to read. For a long time reading had been her chief solace. But she could not read. She glanced round the inhospitable chamber, and thought of the hundreds of rooms—some splendid and some vile, but all arid in their unwelcoming aspect—through which she had passed in her progress from mad exultation to calm and cold disgust. The ceaseless din of the street annoyed her jaded ears. And a great wave of desire for peace, peace of no matter what kind, swept through her. And then her deep distrust of Gerald reawakened; in spite of his seriously desperate air, which had a quality of sincerity quite new in her experience of him, she could not be entirely sure that, in asserting utter penury, he was not after all merely using a trick to get rid of her.

She sprang up, threw the book on the bed, and seized her gloves. She would follow him, if she could. She would do what she had never done before—she would spy on him. Fighting against her lassitude, she descended the long winding stairs, and peeped forth from the doorway into the street. The ground floor of the hotel was a wine-shop; the stout landlord was lightly flicking one of the three little yellow tables that stood on the pavement. He smiled with his customary benevolence, and silently pointed in the direction of the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. She saw Gerald down there in the distance. He was smoking a cigar.

He seemed to be a little man without a care. The smoke of the cigar came first round his left cheek and then round his right, sailing away into nothing. He walked with a gay spring, but not quickly, flourishing his cane as freely as the traffic of the pavement would permit, glancing into all the shop windows and into the eyes of all the women under forty. This was not at all the same man as had a moment ago been spitting angry menaces at her in the bedroom of the hotel. It was a fellow of blithe charm, ripe for any adventurous joys that destiny had to offer.

Supposing he turned round and saw her?

If he turned round and saw her and asked her what she was doing there in the street, she would tell him plainly: “I’m following you, to find out what you do.”

But he did not turn. He went straight forward, deviating at the church, where the crowd became thicker, into the Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, and so to the boulevard, which he crossed. The whole city seemed excited and vivacious. Cannons boomed in slow succession, and flags were flying. Sophia had no conception of the significance of those guns, for, though she read a great deal, she never read a newspaper; the idea of opening a newspaper never occurred to her. But she was accustomed to the feverish atmosphere of Paris. She had lately seen regiments of cavalry flashing and prancing in the Luxembourg Gardens, and had much admired the fine picture. She accepted the booming as another expression of the high spirits that had to find vent somehow in this feverish empire. She so accepted it and forgot it, using all the panorama of the capital as a dim background for her exacerbated egoism.

She was obliged to walk slowly, because Gerald walked slowly. A beautiful woman, or any woman not positively hag-like or venerable, who walks slowly in the streets of Paris becomes at once the cause of inconvenient desires, as representing the main objective on earth, always transcending in importance politics and affairs. Just as a true patriotic Englishman cannot be too busy to run after a fox, so a Frenchman is always ready to forsake all in order to follow a woman whom he has never before set eyes on. Many men thought twice about her, with her romantic Saxon mystery of temperament, and her Parisian clothes; but all refrained from affronting her, not in the least out of respect for the gloom in her face, but from an expert conviction that those rapt eyes were fixed immovably on another male. She walked unscathed amid the frothing hounds as though protected by a spell.

On the south side of the boulevard, Gerald proceeded down the Rue Montmartre, and then turned suddenly into the Rue Croissant. Sophia stopped and asked the price of some combs which were exposed outside a little shop. Then she went on, boldly passing the end of the Rue Croissant. No shadow of Gerald! She saw the signs of newspapers all along the street, *Le Bien Public, La Presse Libre, La Patrie*. There was a creamery at the corner. She entered it, asked for a cup of chocolate, and sat down. She wanted to drink coffee, but every doctor had forbidden coffee to her, on account of her attacks of dizziness. Then, having ordered chocolate, she felt that, on this occasion, when she had need of strength in her great fatigue, only coffee could suffice her, and she changed the order. She was close to the door, and Gerald could not escape her vigilance if he emerged at that end of the street. She drank the coffee with greedy satisfaction, and waited in the creamery till she began to feel conspicuous there. And then Gerald went by the door, within six feet of her. He turned the corner and continued his descent of the Rue Montmartre. She paid for her coffee and followed the chase. Her blood seemed to be up. Her lips were tightened, and her thought was: “Wherever he goes, I’ll go, and I don’t care what happens.” She despised him. She felt herself above him. She felt that somehow, since quitting the hotel, he had been gradually growing more and more vile and meet to be exterminated. She imagined infamies as to the Rue Croissant. There was no obvious ground for this intensifying of her attitude towards him; it was merely the result of the chase. All that could be definitely charged against him was the smoking of a cigar.

He stepped into a tobacco-shop, and came out with a longer cigar than the first one, a more expensive

article, stripped off its collar, and lighted it as a millionaire might have lighted it. This was the man who swore that he did not possess five francs.

She tracked him as far as the Rue de Rivoli, and then lost him. There were vast surging crowds in the Rue de Rivoli, and much bunting, and soldiers and gesticulatory policemen. The general effect of the street was that all things were brightly waving in the breeze. She was caught in the crowd as in the current of a stream, and when she tried to sidle out of it into a square, a row of smiling policemen barred her passage; she was a part of the traffic that they had to regulate. She drifted till the Louvre came into view. After all, Gerald had only strolled forth to see the sight of the day, whatever it might be! She knew not what it was. She had no curiosity about it. In the middle of all that thickening mass of humanity, staring with one accord at the vast monument of royal and imperial vanities, she thought, with her characteristic grimness, of the sacrifice of her whole career as a school-teacher for the chance of seeing Gerald once a quarter in the shop. She gloated over that, as a sick appetite will gloat over tainted food. And she saw the shop, and the curve of the stairs up to the showroom, and the pier-glass in the showroom.

Then the guns began to boom again, and splendid carriages swept one after another from under a majestic archway and glittered westward down a lane of spotless splendid uniforms. The carriages were laden with still more splendid uniforms, and with enchanting toilettes. Sophia, in her modestly stylish black, mechanically noticed how much easier it was for attired women to sit in a carriage now that crinolines had gone. That was the sole impression made upon her by this glimpse of the last fête of the Napoleonic Empire. She knew not that the supreme pillars of imperialism were exhibiting themselves before her; and that the eyes of those uniforms and those toilettes were full of the legendary beauty of Eugénie, and their ears echoing to the long phrases of Napoleon the Third about his gratitude to his people for their confidence in him as shown by the plebiscite, and about the ratification of constitutional reforms guaranteeing order, and about the empire having been strengthened at its base, and about showing force by moderation and envisaging the future without fear, and about the bosom of peace and liberty, and the eternal continuance of his dynasty.

She just wondered vaguely what was afoot.

When the last carriage had rolled away, and the guns and acclamations had ceased, the crowd at length began to scatter. She was carried by it into the Place du Palais Royal, and in a few moments she managed to withdraw into the Rue des Bons Enfants and was free.

The coins in her purse amounted to three sous, and therefore, though she felt exhausted to the point of illness, she had to return to the hotel on foot. Very slowly she crawled upwards in the direction of the Boulevard, through the expiring gaiety of the city. Near the Bourse a fiacre overtook her, and in the fiacre were Gerald and a woman. Gerald had not seen her; he was talking eagerly to his ornate companion. All his body was alive. The fiacre was out of sight in a moment, but Sophia judged instantly the grade of the woman, who was evidently of the discreet class that frequented the big shops of an afternoon with something of their own to sell.

Sophia's grimness increased. The pace of the fiacre, her fatigued body, Gerald's delightful, careless vivacity, the attractive streaming veil of the nice, modest courtesan—everything conspired to increase it.

III

Gerald returned to the bedroom which contained his wife and all else that he owned in the world at about nine o'clock that evening. Sophia was in bed. She had been driven to bed by weariness. She would have preferred to sit up to receive her husband, even if it had meant sitting up all night, but her body was too heavy for her spirit. She lay in the dark. She had eaten nothing. Gerald came straight into the room. He struck a match, which burned blue, with a stench, for several seconds, and then gave a clear, yellow flame. He lit a candle; and saw his wife.

"Oh!" he said; "you're there, are you?"

She offered no reply.

"Won't speak, eh?" he said. "Agreeable sort of wife! Well, have you made up your mind to do what I told you? I've come back especially to know."

She still did not speak.

He sat down, with his hat on, and stuck out his feet, wagging them to and fro on the heels.

"I'm quite without money," he went on. "And I'm sure your people will be glad to lend us a bit till I get some. Especially as it's a question of you starving as well as me. If I had enough to pay your fares to Bursley I'd pack you off. But I haven't."

She could only hear his exasperating voice. The end of the bed was between her eyes and his.

"Liar!" she said, with uncompromising distinctness. The word reached him barbed with all the poison of her contempt and disgust.

There was a pause.

"Oh! I'm a liar, am I? Thanks. I lied enough to get you, I'll admit. But you never complained of that. I remember beginning the New Year well with a thumping lie just to have a sight of you, my vixen. But you didn't complain then. I took you with only the clothes on your back. And I've spent every cent I had on you.

And now I'm spun, you call me a liar."

She said nothing.

"However," he went on, "this is going to come to an end, this is!"

He rose, changed the position of the candle, putting it on a chest of drawers, and then drew his trunk from the wall, and knelt in front of it.

She gathered that he was packing his clothes. At first she did not comprehend his reference to beginning the New Year. Then his meaning revealed itself. That story to her mother about having been attacked by ruffians at the bottom of King Street had been an invention, a ruse to account plausibly for his presence on her mother's doorstep! And she had never suspected that the story was not true. In spite of her experience of his lying, she had never suspected that that particular statement was a lie. What a simpleton she was!

There was a continual movement in the room for about a quarter of an hour. Then a key turned in the lock of the trunk.

His head popped up over the foot of the bed. "This isn't a joke, you know," he said.

She kept silence.

"I give you one more chance. Will you write to your mother—or Constance if you like—or won't you?"

She scorned to reply in any way.

"I'm your husband," he said. "And it's your duty to obey me, particularly in an affair like this. I order you to write to your mother."

The corners of her lips turned downwards.

Angered by her mute obstinacy, he broke away from the bed with a sudden gesture.

"You do as you like," he cried, putting on his overcoat, "and I shall do as I like. You can't say I haven't warned you. It's your own deliberate choice, mind you! Whatever happens to you you've brought on yourself." He lifted and shrugged his shoulders, to get the overcoat exactly into place on his shoulders.

She would not speak a word, not even to insist that she was indisposed.

He pushed his trunk outside the door, and returned to the bed.

"You understand," he said menacingly: "I'm off."

She looked up at the foul ceiling.

"Hm!" he sniffed, bringing his reserves of pride to combat the persistent silence that was damaging his dignity. And he went off, sticking his head forward like a pugilist.

"Here!" she muttered. "You're forgetting this."

He turned.

She stretched her hand to the night-table and held up a red circlet.

"What is it?"

"It's the bit of paper off the cigar you bought in the Rue Montmartre this afternoon," she answered, in a significant tone.

He hesitated, then swore violently, and bounced out of the room. He had made her suffer, but she was almost repaid for everything by that moment of cruel triumph. She exulted in it, and never forgot it.

Five minutes later, the gloomy menial in felt slippers and alpaca jacket, who seemed to pass the whole of his life flitting in and out of bedrooms like a rabbit in a warren, carried Gerald's trunk downstairs. She recognized the peculiar tread of his slippers.

Then there was a knock at the door. The landlady entered, actuated by a legitimate curiosity.

"Madame is suffering?" the landlady began.

Sophia refused offers of food and nursing.

"Madame knows without doubt that monsieur has gone away?"

"Has he paid the bill?" Sophia asked bluntly.

"But yes, madame, till tomorrow. Then madame has want of nothing?"

"If you will extinguish the candle," said Sophia.

He had deserted her, then!

"All this," she reflected, listening in the dark to the ceaseless rattle of the street, "because mother and Constance wanted to see the elephant, and I had to go into father's room! I should never have caught sight of him from the drawing-room window!"

IV

She passed a night of physical misery, exasperated by the tireless rattling vitality of the street. She kept saying to herself: "I'm all alone now, and I'm going to be ill. I am ill." She saw herself dying in Paris, and heard the expressions of facile sympathy and idle curiosity drawn forth by the sight of the dead body of this foreign woman in a little Paris hotel. She reached the stage, in the gradual excruciation of her nerves, when she was obliged to concentrate her agonized mind on an intense and painful expectancy of the next new noise, which when it came increased her torture and decreased her strength to support it. She went through all the interminable dilatoriness of the dawn, from the moment when she could scarcely discern the window to the moment when she could read the word "Bock" on the red circlet of paper which had tossed all night on

the sea of the counterpane. She knew she would never sleep again. She could not imagine herself asleep; and then she was startled by a sound that seemed to clash with the rest of her impressions. It was a knocking at the door. With a start she perceived that she must have been asleep.

"Enter," she murmured.

There entered the menial in alpaca. His waxen face showed a morose commiseration. He noiselessly approached the bed—he seemed to have none of the characteristics of a man, but to be a creature infinitely mysterious and aloof from humanity—and held out to Sophia a visiting card in his grey hand.

It was Chirac's card.

"Monsieur asked for monsieur," said the waiter. "And then, as monsieur had gone away, he demanded to see madame. He says it is very important."

Her heart jumped, partly in vague alarm, and partly with a sense of relief at this chance of speaking to someone whom she knew. She tried to reflect rationally.

"What time is it?" she inquired.

"Eleven o'clock, madame."

This was surprising. The fact that it was eleven o'clock destroyed the remains of her self-confidence. How could it be eleven o'clock, with the dawn scarcely finished?

"He says it is very important," repeated the waiter, imperturbably and solemnly. "Will madame see him an instant?"

Between resignation and anticipation she said: "Yes."

"It is well, madame," said the waiter, disappearing without a sound.

She sat up and managed to drag her *matinée* from a chair and put it around her shoulders. Then she sank back from weakness, physical and spiritual. She hated to receive Chirac in a bedroom, and particularly in that bedroom. But the hotel had no public room except the dining-room, which began to be occupied after eleven o'clock. Moreover, she could not possibly get up. Yes, on the whole she was pleased to see Chirac. He was almost her only acquaintance, assuredly the only being whom she could by any stretch of meaning call a friend, in the whole of Europe. Gerald and she had wandered to and fro, skimming always over the real life of nations, and never penetrating into it. There was no place for them, because they had made none. With the exception of Chirac, whom an accident of business had thrown into Gerald's company years before, they had no social relations. Gerald was not a man to make friends; he did not seem to need friends, or at any rate to feel the want of them. But as chance had given him Chirac, he maintained the connexion whenever they came to Paris. Sophia, of course, had not been able to escape from the solitude imposed by existence in hotels. Since her marriage she had never spoken to a woman in the way of intimacy. But once or twice she had approached intimacy with Chirac, whose wistful admiration of her always aroused into activity her desire to charm.

Preceded by the menial, he came into the room hurriedly, apologetically, with an air of acute anxiety. And as he saw her lying on her back, with flushed features, her hair disarranged, and only the grace of the silk ribbons of her *matinée* to mitigate the melancholy repulsiveness of her surroundings, that anxiety seemed to deepen.

"Dear madame," he stammered, "all my excuses!" He hastened to the bedside and kissed her hand—a little peck, according to his custom. "You are ill?"

"I have my migraine," she said. "You want Gerald?"

"Yes," he said diffidently. "He had promised—"

"He has left me," Sophia interrupted him in her weak and fatigued voice. She closed her eyes as she uttered the words.

"Left you?" He glanced round to be sure that the waiter had retired.

"Quitted me! Abandoned me. Last night!"

"Not possible!" he breathed.

She nodded. She felt intimate with him. Like all secretive persons, she could be suddenly expansive at times.

"It is serious?" he questioned.

"All that is most serious," she replied.

"And you ill! Ah, the wretch! Ah, the wretch! That, for example!" He waved his hat about.

"What is it you want, Chirac?" she demanded, in a confidential tone.

"Eh, well," said Chirac. "You do not know where he has gone?"

"No. What do you want?" she insisted.

He was nervous. He fidgeted. She guessed that, though warm with sympathy for her plight, he was preoccupied by interests and apprehensions of his own. He did not refuse her request temporarily to leave the astonishing matter of her situation in order to discuss the matter of his visit.

"Eh, well! He came to me yesterday afternoon in the Rue Croissant to borrow some money."

She understood then the object of Gerald's stroll on the previous afternoon.

"I hope you didn't lend him any," she said.

"Eh, well! It was like this. He said he ought to have received five thousand francs yesterday morning, but that he had had a telegram that it would not arrive till today. And he had need of five hundred francs at once.

I had not five hundred francs"—he smiled sadly, as if to insinuate that he did not handle such sums—"but I borrowed it from the cash-box of the journal. It is necessary, absolutely, that I should return it this morning." He spoke with increased seriousness. "Your husband said he would take a cab and bring me the money immediately on the arrival of the post this morning—about nine o'clock. Pardon me for deranging you with such a—"

He stopped. She could see that he really was grieved to "derange" her, but that circumstances pressed.

"At my paper," he murmured, "it is not so easy as that to—in fine—!"

Gerald had genuinely been at his last francs. He had not lied when she thought he had lied. The nakedness of his character showed now. Instantly upon the final and definite cessation of the lawful supply of money, he had set his wits to obtain money unlawfully. He had, in fact, simply stolen it from Chirac, with the ornamental addition of endangering Chirac's reputation and situation—as a sort of reward to Chirac for the kindness! And, further, no sooner had he got hold of the money than it had intoxicated him, and he had yielded to the first fatuous temptation. He had no sense of responsibility, no scruple. And as for common prudence—had he not risked permanent disgrace and even prison for a paltry sum which he would certainly squander in two or three days? Yes, it was indubitable that he would stop at nothing, at nothing whatever.

"You did not know that he was coming to me?" asked Chirac, pulling his short, silky brown beard.

"No," Sophia answered.

"But he said that you had charged him with your friendlinesses to me!" He nodded his head once or twice, sadly but candidly accepting, in his quality of a Latin, the plain facts of human nature—reconciling himself to them at once.

Sophia revolted at this crowning detail of the structure of Gerald's rascality.

"It is fortunate that I can pay you," she said.

"But—" he tried to protest.

"I have quite enough money."

She did not say this to screen Gerald, but merely from *amour-propre*. She would not let Chirac think that she was the wife of a man bereft of all honour. And so she clothed Gerald with the rag of having, at any rate, not left her in destitution as well as in sickness. Her assertion seemed a strange one, in view of the fact that he had abandoned her on the previous evening—that is to say, immediately after the borrowing from Chirac. But Chirac did not examine the statement.

"Perhaps he has the intention to send me the money. Perhaps, after all, he is now at the offices—"

"No," said Sophia. "He is gone. Will you go downstairs and wait for me. We will go together to Cook's office. It is English money I have."

"Cook's?" he repeated. The word now so potent had then little significance. "But you are ill. You cannot—"

"I feel better."

She did. Or rather, she felt nothing except the power of her resolve to remove the painful anxiety from that wistful brow. The shame of the trick played on Chirac awakened new forces in her. She dressed in a physical torment which, however, had no more reality than a nightmare. She searched in a place where even an inquisitive husband would not think of looking, and then, painfully, she descended the long stairs, holding to the rail, which swam round and round her, carrying the whole staircase with it. "After all," she thought, "I can't be seriously ill, or I shouldn't have been able to get up and go out like this. I never guessed early this morning that I could do it! I can't possibly be as ill as I thought I was!"

And in the vestibule she encountered Chirac's face, lightening at the sight of her, which proved to him that his deliverance was really to be accomplished.

"Permit me—"

"I'm all right," she smiled, tottering. "Get a cab." It suddenly occurred to her that she might quite as easily have given him the money in English notes; he could have changed them. But she had not thought. Her brain would not operate. She was dreaming and waking together.

He helped her into the cab.

V

In the *bureau de change* there was a little knot of English people, with naïve, romantic, and honest faces, quite different from the faces outside in the street. No corruption in those faces, but a sort of wondering and infantile sincerity, rather out of its element and lost in a land too unsophisticated, seeming to belong to an earlier age! Sophia liked their tourist stare, and their plain and ugly clothes. She longed to be back in England, longed for a moment with violence, drowning in that desire.

The English clerk behind his brass bars took her notes, and carefully examined them one by one. She watched him, not entirely convinced of his reality, and thought vaguely of the detestable morning when she had abstracted the notes from Gerald's pocket. She was filled with pity for the simple, ignorant Sophia of those days, the Sophia who still had a few ridiculous illusions concerning Gerald's character. Often, since, she had been tempted to break into the money, but she had always withstood the temptation, saying to herself that an hour of more urgent need would come. It had come. She was proud of her firmness, of the force of

will which had enabled her to reserve the fund intact. The clerk gave her a keen look, and then asked her how she would take the French money. And she saw the notes falling down one after another on to the counter as the clerk separated them with a snapping sound of the paper.

Chirac was beside her.

“Does that make the count?” she said, having pushed towards him five hundred-franc notes.

“I should not know how to thank you,” he said, accepting the notes. “Truly—”

His joy was unmistakably eager. He had had a shock and a fright, and he now saw the danger past. He could return to the cashier of his newspaper, and fling down the money with a lordly and careless air, as if to say: “When it is a question of these English, one can always be sure!” But first he would escort her to the hotel. She declined—she did not know why, for he was her sole point of moral support in all France. He insisted. She yielded. So she turned her back, with regret, on that little English oasis in the Sahara of Paris, and staggered to the fiacre.

And now that she had done what she had to do, she lost control of her body, and reclined flaccid and inert. Chirac was evidently alarmed. He did not speak, but glanced at her from time to time with eyes full of fear. The carriage appeared to her to be swimming amid waves over great depths. Then she was aware of a heavy weight against her shoulder: she had slipped down upon Chirac, unconscious.

CHAPTER V

FEVER

I

Then she was lying in bed in a small room, obscure because it was heavily curtained; the light came through the inner pair of curtains of *écru* lace, with a beautiful soft silvery quality. A man was standing by the side of the bed—not Chirac.

"Now, madame," he said to her, with kind firmness, and speaking with a charming exaggerated purity of the vowels. "You have the mucous fever. I have had it myself. You will be forced to take baths, very frequently. I must ask you to reconcile yourself to that, to be good."

She did not reply. It did not occur to her to reply. But she certainly thought that this doctor—he was probably a doctor—was overestimating her case. She felt better than she had felt for two days. Still, she did not desire to move, nor was she in the least anxious as to her surroundings. She lay quiet.

A woman in a rather coquettish deshabille watched over her with expert skill.

Later, Sophia seemed to be revisiting the sea on whose waves the cab had swum; but now she was under the sea, in a watery gulf, terribly deep; and the sounds of the world came to her through the water, sudden and strange. Hands seized her and forced her from the subaqueous grotto where she had hidden into new alarms. And she briefly perceived that there was a large bath by the side of the bed, and that she was being pushed into it. The water was icy cold. After that her outlook upon things was for a time clearer and more precise. She knew from fragments of talk which she heard that she was put into the cold bath by her bed every three hours, night and day, and that she remained in it for ten minutes. Always, before the bath, she had to drink a glass of wine, and sometimes another glass while she was in the bath. Beyond this wine, and occasionally a cup of soup, she took nothing, had no wish to take anything. She grew perfectly accustomed to these extraordinary habits of life, to this merging of night and day into one monotonous and endless repetition of the same rite amid the same circumstances on exactly the same spot. Then followed a period during which she objected to being constantly wakened up for this annoying immersion. And she fought against it even in her dreams. Long days seemed to pass when she could not be sure whether she had been put into the bath or not, when all external phenomena were disconcertingly interwoven with matters which she knew to be merely fanciful. And then she was overwhelmed by the hopeless gravity of her state. She felt that her state was desperate. She felt that she was dying. Her unhappiness was extreme, not because she was dying, but because the veils of sense were so puzzling, so exasperating, and because her exhausted body was so vitiated, in every fibre, by disease. She was perfectly aware that she was going to die. She cried aloud for a pair of scissors. She wanted to cut off her hair, and to send part of it to Constance and part of it to her mother, in separate packages. She insisted upon separate packages. Nobody would give her a pair of scissors. She implored, meekly, haughtily, furiously, but nobody would satisfy her. It seemed to her shocking that all her hair should go with her into her coffin while Constance and her mother had nothing by which to remember her, no tangible souvenir of her beauty. Then she fought for the scissors. She clutched at someone—always through those baffling veils—who was putting her into the bath by the bedside, and fought frantically. It appeared to her that this someone was the rather stout woman who had supped at Sylvain's with the quarrelsome Englishman four years ago. She could not rid herself of this singular conceit, though she knew it to be absurd . . .

A long time afterwards—it seemed like a century—she did actually and unmistakably see the woman sitting by her bed, and the woman was crying.

"Why are you crying?" Sophia asked wonderingly.

And the other, younger, woman, who was standing at the foot of the bed, replied:

"You do well to ask! It is you who have hurt her, in your delirium, when you so madly demanded the scissors."

The stout woman smiled with the tears on her cheeks; but Sophia wept, from remorse. The stout woman looked old, worn, and untidy. The other one was much younger. Sophia did not trouble to inquire from them

who they were.

That little conversation formed a brief interlude in the delirium, which overtook her again and distorted everything. She forgot, however, that she was destined to die.

One day her brain cleared. She could be sure that she had gone to sleep in the morning and not wakened till the evening. Hence she had not been put into the bath.

“Have I had my baths?” she questioned.

It was the doctor who faced her.

“No,” he said, “the baths are finished.”

She knew from his face that she was out of danger. Moreover, she was conscious of a new feeling in her body, as though the fount of physical energy within her, long interrupted, had recommenced to flow—but very slowly, a trickling. It was a rebirth. She was not glad, but her body itself was glad; her body had an existence of its own.

She was now often left by herself in the bedroom. To the right of the foot of the bed was a piano in walnut, and to the left a chimney-piece with a large mirror. She wanted to look at herself in the mirror. But it was a very long way off. She tried to sit up, and could not. She hoped that one day she would be able to get as far as the mirror. She said not a word about this to either of the two women.

Often they would sit in the bedroom and talk without ceasing. Sophia learnt that the stout woman was named Foucault, and the other Laurence. Sometimes Laurence would address Madame Foucault as Aimée, but usually she was more formal. Madame Foucault always called the other Laurence.

Sophia’s curiosity stirred and awoke. But she could not obtain any very exact information as to where she was, except that the house was in the Rue Bréda, off the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. She recollected vaguely that the reputation of the street was sinister. It appeared that, on the day when she had gone out with Chirac, the upper part of the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette was closed for repairs—(this she remembered)—and that the cabman had turned up the Rue Bréda in order to make a détour, and that it was just opposite to the house of Madame Foucault that she had lost consciousness. Madame Foucault happened to be getting into a cab at the moment; but she had told Chirac nevertheless to carry Sophia into the house, and a policeman had helped. Then, when the doctor came, it was discovered that she could not be moved, save to a hospital, and both Madame Foucault and Laurence were determined that no friend of Chirac’s should be committed to the horrors of a Paris hospital. Madame Foucault had suffered in one as a patient, and Laurence had been a nurse in another . . .

Chirac was now away. The women talked loosely of a war.

“How kind you have been!” murmured Sophia, with humid eyes.

But they silenced her with gestures. She was not to talk. They seemed to have nothing further to tell her. They said Chirac would be returning perhaps soon, and that she could talk to him. Evidently they both held Chirac in affection. They said often that he was a charming boy.

Bit by bit Sophia comprehended the length and the seriousness of her illness, and the immense devotion of the two women, and the terrific disturbance of their lives, and her own debility. She saw that the women were strongly attached to her, and she could not understand why, as she had never done anything for them, whereas they had done everything for her. She had not learnt that benefits rendered, not benefits received, are the cause of such attachments.

All the time she was plotting, and gathering her strength to disobey orders and get as far as the mirror. Her preliminary studies and her preparations were as elaborate as those of a prisoner arranging to escape from a fortress. The first attempt was a failure. The second succeeded. Though she could not stand without support, she managed by clinging to the bed to reach a chair, and to push the chair in front of her until it approached the mirror. The enterprise was exciting and terrific. Then she saw a face in the glass: white, incredibly emaciated, with great, wild, staring eyes; and the shoulders were bent as though with age. It was a painful; almost a horrible sight. It frightened her so that in her alarm she recoiled from it. Not attending sufficiently to the chair, she sank to the ground. She could not pick herself up, and she was caught there, miserably, by her angered gaolers. The vision of her face taught her more efficiently than anything else the gravity of her adventure. As the women lifted her inert, repentant mass into the bed, she reflected, “How queer my life is!” It seemed to her that she ought to have been trimming hats in the showroom instead of being in that curtained, mysterious, Parisian interior.

II

One day Madame Foucault knocked at the door of Sophia’s little room (this ceremony of knocking was one of the indications that Sophia, convalescent, had been reinstated in her rights as an individual), and cried:

“Madame, one is going to leave you all alone for some time.”

“Come in,” said Sophia, who was sitting up in an armchair, and reading.

Madame Foucault opened the door. “One is going to leave you all alone for some time,” she repeated in a low, confidential voice, sharply contrasting with her shriek behind the door.

Sophia nodded and smiled, and Madame Foucault also nodded and smiled. But Madame Foucault’s face

quickly resumed its anxious expression.

"The servant's brother marries himself today, and she implored me to accord her two days—what would you? Madame Laurence is out. And I must go out. It is four o'clock. I shall re-enter at six o'clock striking. Therefore . . ."

"Perfectly," Sophia concurred.

She looked curiously at Madame Foucault, who was carefully made up and arranged for the street, in a dress of yellow tussore with blue ornaments, bright lemon-coloured gloves, a little blue bonnet, and a little white parasol not wider when opened than her shoulders. Cheeks, lips, and eyes were heavily charged with rouge, powder, or black. And that too abundant waist had been most cunningly confined in a belt that descended beneath, instead of rising above, the lower masses of the vast torso. The general effect was worthy of the effort that must have gone to it. Madame Foucault was not rejuvenated by her toilette, but it almost procured her pardon for the crime of being over forty, fat, creased, and worn out. It was one of those defeats that are a triumph.

"You are very chic," said Sophia, uttering her admiration.

"Ah!" said Madame Foucault, shrugging the shoulders of disillusion.

"Chic! What does that do?"

But she was pleased.

The front-door banged. Sophia, by herself for the first time in the flat into which she had been carried unconscious and which she had never since left, had the disturbing sensation of being surrounded by mysterious rooms and mysterious things. She tried to continue reading, but the sentences conveyed nothing to her. She rose—she could walk now a little—and looked out of the window, through the interstices of the pattern of the lace curtains. The window gave on the courtyard, which was about sixteen feet below her. A low wall divided the courtyard from that of the next house. And the windows of the two houses, only to be distinguished by the different tints of their yellow paint, rose tier above tier in level floors, continuing beyond Sophia's field of vision. She pressed her face against the glass, and remembered the St Luke's Square of her childhood; and just as there from the showroom window she could not even by pressing her face against the glass see the pavement, so here she could not see the roof; the courtyard was like the bottom of a well. There was no end to the windows; six storeys she could count, and the sills of a seventh were the limit of her view. Every window was heavily curtained, like her own. Some of the upper ones had green sunblinds. Scarcely any sound! Mysteries brooded without as well as within the flat of Madame Foucault. Sophia saw a bodiless hand twitch at a curtain and vanish. She noticed a green bird in a tiny cage on a sill in the next house. A woman whom she took to be the concierge appeared in the courtyard, deposited a small plant in the track of a ray of sunshine that lighted a corner for a couple of hours in the afternoon, and disappeared again. Then she heard a piano—somewhere. That was all. The feeling that secret and strange lives were being lived behind those baffling windows, that humanity was everywhere intimately pulsing around her, oppressed her spirit yet not quite unpleasantly. The environment softened her glance upon the spectacle of existence, insomuch that sadness became a voluptuous pleasure. And the environment threw her back on herself, into a sensuous contemplation of the fundamental fact of Sophia Scales, formerly Sophia Baines.

She turned to the room, with the marks of the bath on the floor by the bed, and the draped piano that was never opened, and her two trunks filling up the corner opposite the door. She had the idea of thoroughly examining those trunks, which Chirac or somebody else must have fetched from the hotel. At the top of one of them was her purse, tied up with old ribbon and ostentatiously sealed! How comical these French people were when they deemed it necessary to be serious! She emptied both trunks, scrutinizing minutely all her goods, and thinking of the varied occasions upon which she had obtained them. Then she carefully restored them, her mind full of souvenirs newly awakened.

She sighed as she straightened her back. A clock struck in another room. It seemed to invite her towards discoveries. She had been in no other room of the flat. She knew nothing of the rest of the flat save by sound. For neither of the other women had ever described it, nor had it occurred to them that Sophia might care to leave her room though she could not leave the house.

She opened her door, and glanced along the dim corridor, with. which she was familiar. She knew that the kitchen lay next to her little room, and that next to the kitchen came the front-door. On the opposite side of the corridor were four double-doors. She crossed to the pair of doors facing her own little door, and quietly turned the handle, but the doors were locked; the same with the next pair. The third pair yielded, and she was in a large bedroom, with three windows on the street. She saw that the second pair of doors, which she had failed to unfasten, also opened into this room. Between the two pairs of doors was a wide bed. In front of the central window was a large dressing-table. To the left of the bed, half hiding the locked doors, was a large screen. On the marble mantelpiece, reflected in a huge mirror, that ascended to the ornate cornice, was a gilt-and-basalt clock, with pendants to match. On the opposite side of the room from this was a long wide couch. The floor was of polished oak, with a skin on either side of the bed. At the foot of the bed was a small writing-table, with a penny bottle of ink on it. A few coloured prints and engravings—representing, for example, Louis Philippe and his family, and people perishing on a raft—broke the tedium of the walls. The first impression on Sophia's eye was one of sombre splendour. Everything had the air of being richly ornamented, draped, looped,

carved, twisted, brocaded into gorgeousness. The dark crimson bed-hangings fell from massive rosettes in majestic folds. The counterpane was covered with lace. The window-curtains had amplitude beyond the necessary, and they were suspended from behind fringed and pleated valances. The green sofa and its sateen cushions were stiff with applied embroidery. The chandelier hanging from the middle of the ceiling, modelled to represent cupids holding festoons, was a glittering confusion of gilt and lustres: the lustres tinkled when Sophia stood on a certain part of the floor. The cane-seated chairs were completely gilded. There was an effect of spaciousness. And the situation of the bed between the two double-doors, with the three windows in front and other pairs of doors communicating with other rooms on either hand, produced in addition an admirable symmetry.

But Sophia, with the sharp gaze of a woman brought up in the traditions of a modesty so proud that it scorns ostentation, quickly tested and condemned the details of this chamber that imitated every luxury. Nothing in it, she found, was "good." And in St Luke's Square "goodness" meant honest workmanship, permanence, the absence of pretence. All the stuffs were cheap and showy and shabby; all the furniture was cracked, warped or broken. The clock showed five minutes past twelve at five o'clock. And further, dust was everywhere, except in those places where even the most perfunctory cleaning could not have left it. In the obscurer pleatings of draperies it lay thick. Sophia's lip curled, and instinctively she lifted her peignoir. One of her mother's phrases came into her head: "a lick and a promise." And then another: "If you want to leave dirt, leave it where everybody can see it, not in the corners."

She peeped behind the screen, and all the horrible welter of a *cabinet de toilette* met her gaze: a repulsive medley of foul waters, stained vessels and cloths, brushes, sponges, powders, and pastes. Clothes were hung up in disorder on rough nails; among them she recognized a dressing-gown of Madame Foucault's, and, behind affairs of later date, the dazzling scarlet cloak in which she had first seen Madame Foucault, dilapidated now. So this was Madame Foucault's room! This was the bower from which that elegance emerged, the filth from which had sprung the mature blossom!

She passed from that room direct to another, of which the shutters were closed, leaving it in twilight. This room too was a bedroom, rather smaller than the middle one, and having only one window, but furnished with the same dubious opulence. Dust covered it everywhere, and small footmarks were visible in the dust on the floor. At the back was a small door, papered to match the wall, and within this door was a *cabinet de toilette,* with no light and no air; neither in the room nor in the closet was there any sign of individual habitation. She traversed the main bedroom again and found another bedroom to balance the second one, but open to the full light of day, and in a state of extreme disorder; the double-pillowed bed had not even been made; clothes and towels draped all the furniture; shoes were about the floor, and on a piece of string tied across the windows hung a single white stocking, wet. At the back was a *cabinet de toilette,* as dark as the other one, a vile malodorous mess of appliances whose familiar forms loomed vague and extraordinarily sinister in the dense obscurity. Sophia turned away with the righteous disgust of one whose preparations for the gaze of the world are as candid and simple as those of a child. Concealed dirt shocked her as much as it would have shocked her mother; and as for the trickeries of the toilette table, she contemned them as harshly as a young saint who has never been tempted contemns moral weakness. She thought of the strange flaccid daily life of those two women, whose hours seemed to slip unprofitably away without any result of achievement. She had actually witnessed nothing; but since the beginning of her convalescence her ears had heard, and she could piece the evidences together. There was never any sound in the flat, outside the kitchen, until noon. Then vague noises and smells would commence. And about one o'clock Madame Foucault, disarrayed, would come to inquire if the servant had attended to the needs of the invalid. Then the odours of cookery would accentuate themselves; bells rang; fragments of conversations escaped through doors ajar; occasionally a man's voice or a heavy step; then the fragrance of coffee; sometimes the sound of a kiss, the banging of the front door, the noise of brushing, or of the shaking of a carpet, a little scream as at some trifling domestic contretemps. Laurence, still in a dressing-gown, would lounge into Sophia's room, dirty, haggard, but polite with a curious stiff ceremony, and would drink her coffee there. This wandering in peignoirs would continue till three o'clock, and then Laurence might say, as if nerving herself to an unusual and immense effort: "I must be dressed by five o'clock. I have not a moment." Often Madame Foucault did not dress at all; on such days she would go to bed immediately after dinner, with the remark that she didn't know what was the matter with her, but she was exhausted. And then the servant would retire to her seventh floor, and there would be silence until, now and then, faint creepings were heard at midnight or after. Once or twice, through the chinks of her door, Sophia had seen a light at two o'clock in the morning, just before the dawn.

Yet these were the women who had saved her life, who between them had put her into a cold bath every three hours night and day for weeks. Surely it was impossible after that to despise them for shiftlessness and talkative idling in peignoirs; impossible to despise them for anything whatever! But Sophia, conscious of her inheritance of strong and resolute character, did despise them as poor things. The one point on which she envied them was their formal manners to her, which seemed to become more dignified and graciously distant as her health improved. It was always "Madame," "Madame," to her, with an intonation of increasing deference. They might have been apologizing to her for themselves.

She prowled into all the corners of the flat; but she discovered no more rooms, nothing but a large cupboard crammed with Madame Foucault's dresses. Then she went back to the large bedroom, and enjoyed the busy movement and rattle of the sloping street, and had long, vague yearnings for strength and for freedom in wide, sane places. She decided that on the morrow she would dress herself "properly," and never again wear a peignoir; the peignoir, and all that it represented, disgusted her. And while looking at the street she ceased to see it and saw Cook's office and Chirac helping her into the carriage. Where was he? Why had he brought her to this impossible abode? What did he mean by such conduct? . . . But could he have acted otherwise? He had done the one thing that he could do . . . Chance! . . . Chance! And why an impossible abode? Was one place more impossible than another? . . . All this came of running away from home with Gerald. It was remarkable that she seldom thought of Gerald. He had vanished from her life as he had come into it—madly, preposterously. She wondered what the next stage in her career would be. She certainly could not forecast it. Perhaps Gerald was starving, or in prison . . . Bah! That exclamation ex pressed her appalling disdain of Gerald and of the Sophia who had once deemed him the paragon of men. Bah!

A carriage stopping in front of the house awakened her from her meditation. Madame Foucault and a man very much younger than Madame Foucault got out of it. Sophia fled. After all, this prying into other people's rooms was quite inexcusable. She dropped on to her own bed and picked up a book, in case Madame Foucault should come in.

III

In the evening, just after night had fallen, Sophia on the bed heard the sound of raised and acrimonious voices in Madame Foucault's room. Nothing except dinner had happened since the arrival of Madame Foucault and the young man. These two had evidently dined informally in the bedroom on a dish or so prepared by Madame Foucault, who had herself served Sophia with her invalid's repast. The odours of cookery still hung in the air.

The noise of virulent discussion increased and continued, and then Sophia could hear sobbing, broken by short and fierce phrases from the man. Then the door of the bedroom opened brusquely. "J'en ai soupé!" exclaimed the man, in tones of angry disgust. "Laisse-moi, je te prie!" And then a soft muffled sound, as of a struggle, a quick step, and the very violent banging of the front door. After that there was a noticeable silence, save for the regular sobbing. Sophia wondered when it would cease, that monotonous sobbing.

"What is the matter?" she called out from her bed.

The sobbing grew louder, like the sobbing of a child who has detected an awakening of sympathy and instinctively begins to practise upon it. In the end Sophia arose and put on the peignoir which she had almost determined never to wear again.

The broad corridor was lighted by a small, smelling oil-lamp with a crimson globe. That soft, transforming radiance seemed to paint the whole corridor with voluptuous luxury: so much so that it was impossible to believe that the smell came from the lamp. Under the lamp lay Madame Foucault on the floor, a shapeless mass of lace, frilled linen, and corset; her light brown hair was loose and spread about the floor. At the first glance, the creature abandoned to grief made a romantic and striking picture, and Sophia thought for an instant that she had at length encountered life on a plane that would correspond to her dreams of romance. And she was impressed, with a feeling somewhat akin to that of a middling commoner when confronted with a viscount. There was, in the distance, something imposing and sensational about that prone, trembling figure. The tragic works of love were therein apparently manifest, in a sort of dignified beauty. But when Sophia bent over Madame Foucault, and touched her flabbiness, this illusion at once vanished; and instead of being dramatically pathetic the woman was ridiculous. Her face, especially as damaged by tears, could not support the ordeal of inspection; it was horrible; not a picture, but a palette; or like the coloured design of a pavement artist after a heavy shower. Her great, relaxed eyelids alone would have rendered any face absurd; and there were monstrous details far worse than the eyelids. Then she was amazingly fat; her flesh seemed to be escaping at all ends from a corset strained to the utmost limit And above her boots—she was still wearing dainty, high-heeled, tightly laced boots—the calves bulged suddenly out.

As a woman of between forty and fifty, the obese sepulchre of a dead vulgar beauty, she had no right to passions and tears and homage, or even the means of life; she had no right to expose herself picturesquely beneath a crimson glow in all the panoply of ribboned garters and lacy seductiveness. It was silly; it was disgraceful. She ought to have known that only youth and slimness have the right to appeal to the feelings by indecent abandonments.

Such were the thoughts that mingled with the sympathy of the beautiful and slim Sophia as she bent down to Madame Foucault. She was sorry for her landlady, but at the same time she despised her, and resented her woe.

"What is the matter?" she asked quietly.

"He has chucked me!" stammered Madame Foucault. "And he's the last. I have no one now!"

She rolled over in the most grotesque manner, kicking up her legs, with a fresh outburst of sobs. Sophia felt quite ashamed for her.

“Come and lie down. Come now!” she said, with a touch of sharpness. “You mustn’t lie there like that.”

Madame Foucault’s behaviour was really too outrageous. Sophia helped her, morally rather than physically, to rise, and then persuaded her into the large bedroom. Madame Foucault fell on the bed, of which the counterpane had been thrown over the foot. Sophia covered the lower part of her heaving body with the counterpane.

“Now, calm yourself, please!”

This room too was lit in crimson, by a small lamp that stood on the night-table, and though the shade of the lamp was cracked, the general effect of the great chamber was incontestably romantic. Only the pillows of the wide bed and a small semicircle of floor were illuminated, all the rest lay in shadow. Madame Foucault’s head had dropped between the pillows. A tray containing dirty plates and glasses and a wine-bottle was speciously picturesque on the writing-table.

Despite her genuine gratitude to Madame Foucault for astounding care during her illness, Sophia did not like her landlady, and the present scene made her coldly wrathful. She saw the probability of having another’s troubles piled on the top of her own. She did not, in her mind, actively object, because she felt that she could not be more hopelessly miserable than she was; but she passively resented the imposition. Her reason told her that she ought to sympathize with this ageing, ugly, disagreeable, undignified woman; but her heart was reluctant; her heart did not want to know anything at all about Madame Foucault, nor to enter in any way into her private life.

“I have not a single friend now,” stammered Madame Foucault.

“Oh, yes, you have,” said Sophia, cheerfully. “You have Madame Laurence.”

“Laurence—that is not a friend. You know what I mean.”

“And me! I am your friend!” said Sophia, in obedience to her conscience.

“You are very kind,” replied Madame Foucault, from the pillow. “But you know what I mean.”

The fact was that Sophia did know what she meant. The terms of their intercourse had been suddenly changed. There was no pretentious ceremony now, but the sincerity that disaster brings. The vast structure of make-believe, which between them they had gradually built, had crumbled to nothing.

“I never treated badly any man in my life,” whimpered Madame Foucault. “I have always been a good girl. There is not a man who can say I have not been a good girl. Never was I a girl like the rest. And everyone has said so. Ah! when I tell you that once I had a hotel in the Avenue de la Reine Hortense. Four horses . . . I have sold a horse to Madame Musard . . . You know Madame Musard . . . But one cannot make economies. Impossible to make economies! Ah! In ’fifty-six I was spending a hundred thousand francs a year. That cannot last. Always I have said to myself: ‘That cannot last.’ Always I had the intention . . . But what would you? I installed myself here, and borrowed money to pay for the furniture. There did not remain to me one jewel. The men are poltroons, all! I could let three bedrooms for three hundred and fifty francs a month, and with serving meals and so on I could live.”

“Then that,” Sophia interrupted, pointing to her own bedroom across the corridor, “is your room?”

“Yes,” said Madame Foucault. “I put you in it because at the moment all these were let. They are so no longer. Only one—Laurence—and she does not pay me always. What would you? Tenants—that does not find itself at the present hour . . . I have nothing, and I owe. And he quits me. He chooses this moment to quit me! And why? For nothing. For nothing. That is not for his money that I regret him. No, no! You know, at his age—he is twenty-five—and with a woman like me—one is not generous! No. I loved him. And then a man is a moral support, always. I loved him. It is at my age, mine, that one knows how to love. Beauty goes always, but not the temperament! Ah, that—No! . . . I loved him. I loved him.”

Sophia’s face tingled with a sudden emotion caused by the repetition of those last three words, whose spell no usage can mar. But she said nothing.

“Do you know what I shall become? There is nothing but that for me. And I know of such, who are there already. A charwoman! Yes, a charwoman! More soon or more late. Well, that is life. What would you? One exists always.” Then in a different tone: “I demand your pardon, madame, for talking like this. I ought to have shame.”

And Sophia felt that in listening she also ought to be ashamed. But she was not ashamed. Everything seemed very natural, and even ordinary. And, moreover, Sophia was full of the sense of her superiority over the woman on the bed. Four years ago, in the Restaurant Sylvain, the ingenuous and ignorant Sophia had shyly sat in awe of the resplendent courtesan, with her haughty stare, her large, easy gestures, and her imperturbable contempt for the man who was paying. And now Sophia knew that she, Sophia, knew all that was to be known about human nature. She had not merely youth, beauty, and virtue, but knowledge—knowledge enough to reconcile her to her own misery. She had a vigorous, clear mind, and a clean conscience. She could look anyone in the face, and judge everyone too as a woman of the world. Whereas this obscene wreck on the bed had nothing whatever left. She had not merely lost her effulgent beauty, she had become repulsive. She could never have had any common sense, nor any force of character. Her haughtiness in the day of glory was simply fatuous, based on stupidity. She had passed the years in idleness, trailing about all day in stuffy rooms, and emerging at night to impress nincompoops; continually meaning to do things which she never did, continually surprised at the lateness of the hour, continually occupied with the most

foolish trifles. And here she was at over forty writhing about on the bare floor because a boy of twenty-five (who *must* be a worthless idiot) had abandoned her after a scene of ridiculous shoutings and stampings. She was dependent on the caprices of a young scamp, the last donkey to turn from her with loathing! Sophia thought: "Goodness! If I had been in her place I shouldn't have been like that. I should have been rich. I should have saved like a miser. I wouldn't have been dependent on anybody at that age. If I couldn't have made a better courtesan than this pitiable woman, I would have drowned myself."

In the harsh vanity of her conscious capableness and young strength she thought thus, half forgetting her own follies, and half excusing them on the ground of inexperience.

Sophia wanted to go round the flat and destroy every crimson lamp-shade in it. She wanted to shake Madame Foucault into self-respect and sagacity. Moral reprehension, though present in her mind, was only faint. Certainly she felt the immense gulf between the honest woman and the wanton, but she did not feel it as she would have expected to feel it. "What a fool you have been!" she thought; not "What a sinner!" With her precocious cynicism, which was somewhat unsuited to the lovely northern youthfulness of that face, she said to herself that the whole situation and their relative attitudes would have been different if only Madame Foucault had had the wit to amass a fortune, as (according to Gerald) some of her rivals had succeeded in doing.

And all the time she was thinking, in another part of her mind: "I ought not to be here. It's no use arguing. I ought not to be here. Chirac did the only thing for me there was to do. But I must go now."

Madame Foucault continued to recite her woes, chiefly financial, in a weak voice damp with tears; she also continued to apologize for mentioning herself. She had finished sobbing, and lay looking at the wall, away from Sophia, who stood irresolute near the bed, ashamed for her companion's weakness and incapacity.

"You must not forget," said Sophia, irritated by the unrelieved darkness of the picture drawn by Madame Foucault, "that at least I owe you a considerable sum, and that I am only waiting for you to tell me how much it is. I have asked you twice already, I think."

"Oh, you are still suffering!" said Madame Foucault.

"I am quite well enough to pay my debts," said Sophia.

"I do not like to accept money from you," said Madame Foucault.

"But why not?"

"You will have the doctor to pay."

"Please do not talk in that way," said Sophia. "I have money, and I can pay for everything, and I shall pay for everything."

She was annoyed because she was sure that Madame Foucault was only making a pretence of delicacy, and that in any case her delicacy was preposterous. Sophia had remarked this on the two previous occasions when she had mentioned the subject of bills. Madame Foucault would not treat her as an ordinary lodger, now that the illness was past. She wanted, as it were, to complete brilliantly what she had begun, and to live in Sophia's memory as a unique figure of lavish philanthropy. This was a sentiment, a luxury that she desired to offer herself: the thought that she had played providence to a respectable married lady in distress; she frequently hinted at Sophia's misfortunes and helplessness. But she could not afford the luxury. She gazed at it as a poor woman gazes at costly stuffs through the glass of a shop-window. The truth was, she wanted the luxury for nothing. For a double reason Sophia was exasperated: by Madame Foucault's absurd desire, and by a natural objection to the *rôle* of a subject for philanthropy. She would not admit that Madame Foucault's devotion as a nurse entitled her to the satisfaction of being a philanthropist when there was no necessity for philanthropy.

"How long have I been here?" asked Sophia.

"I don't know," murmured Madame Foucault. "Eight weeks—or is it nine?"

"Suppose we say nine," said Sophia.

"Very well," agreed Madame Foucault, apparently reluctant.

"Now, how much must I pay you per week?"

"I don't want anything—I don't want anything! You are a friend of Chirac's. You—"

"Not at all!" Sophia interrupted, tapping her foot and biting her lip. "Naturally I must pay."

Madame Foucault wept quietly.

"Shall I pay you seventy-five francs a week?" said Sophia, anxious to end the matter.

"It is too much!" Madame Foucault protested, insincerely.

"What? For all you have done for me?"

"I speak not of that," Madame Foucault modestly replied.

If the devotion was not to be paid for, then seventy-five francs a week was assuredly too much, as during more than half the time Sophia had had almost no food. Madame Foucault was therefore within the truth when she again protested, at sight of the banknotes which Sophia brought from her trunk:

"I am sure that it is too much."

"Not at all!" Sophia repeated. "Nine weeks at seventy-five. That makes six hundred and seventy-five. Here are seven hundreds."

"I have no change," said Madame Foucault. "I have nothing."

“That will pay for the hire of the bath,” said Sophia.

She laid the notes on the pillow. Madame Foucault looked at them gluttonously, as any other person would have done in her place. She did not touch them. After an instant she burst into wild tears.

“But why do you cry?” Sophia asked, softened.

“I—I don’t know!” spluttered Madame Foucault. “You are so beautiful. I am so content that we saved you.” Her great wet eyes rested on Sophia.

It was sentimentality. Sophia ruthlessly set it down as sentimentality. But she was touched. She was suddenly moved. Those women, such as they were in their foolishness, probably had saved her life—and she a stranger! Flaccid as they were, they had been capable of resolute perseverance there. It was possible to say that chance had thrown them upon an enterprise which they could not have abandoned till they or death had won. It was possible to say that they hoped vaguely to derive advantage from their labours. But even then? Judged by an ordinary standard, those women had been angels of mercy. And Sophia was despising them, cruelly taking their motives to pieces, accusing them of incapacity when she herself stood a supreme proof of their capacity in, at any rate, one direction! In a rush of emotion she saw her hardness and her injustice.

She bent down. “Never can I forget how kind you have been to me. It is incredible! Incredible!” She spoke softly, in tones loaded with genuine feeling. It was all she said. She could not embroider on the theme. She had no talent for thanksgiving.

Madame Foucault made the beginning of a gesture, as if she meant to kiss Sophia with those thick, marred lips; but refrained. Her head sank back, and then she had a recurrence of the fit of nervous sobbing. Immediately afterwards there was the sound of a latchkey in the front-door of the flat; the bedroom door was open. Still sobbing very violently, she cocked her ear, and pushed the bank-notes under the pillow.

Madame Laurence—as she was called: Sophia had never heard her surname—came straight into the bedroom, and beheld the scene with astonishment in her dark twinkling eyes. She was usually dressed in black, because people said that black suited her, and because black was never out of fashion; black was an expression of her idiosyncrasy. She showed a certain elegance, and by comparison with the extreme disorder of Madame Foucault and the deshabille of Sophia her appearance, all fresh from a modish restaurant, was brilliant; it gave her an advantage over the other two—that moral advantage which ceremonial raiment always gives.

“What is it that passes?” she demanded.

“He has chucked me, Laurence!” exclaimed Madame Foucault, in a sort of hysteric scream which seemed to force its way through her sobs. From the extraordinary freshness of Madame Foucault’s woe, it might have been supposed that her young man had only that instant strode out.

Laurence and Sophia exchanged a swift glance; and Laurence, of course, perceived that Sophia’s relations with her landlady and nurse were now of a different, a more candid order. She indicated her perception of the change by a single slight movement of the eyebrows.

“But listen, Aimée,” she said authoritatively. “You must not let yourself go like that. He will return.”

“Never!” cried Madame Foucault. “It is finished. And he is the last!”

Laurence, ignoring Madame Foucault, approached Sophia. “You have an air very fatigued,” she said, caressing Sophia’s shoulder with her gloved hand. “You are pale like everything. All this not for you. It is not reasonable to remain here, you still suffering! At this hour! Truly not reasonable!”

Her hands persuaded Sophia towards the corridor. And, in fact, Sophia did then notice her own exhaustion. She departed from the room with the ready obedience of physical weakness, and shut her door.

After about half an hour, during which she heard confused noises and murmurings, her door half opened.

“May I enter, since you are not asleep?” It was Laurence’s voice. Twice, now, she had addressed Sophia without adding the formal “madame.”

“Enter, I beg you,” Sophia called from the bed. “I am reading.”

Laurence came in. Sophia was both glad and sorry to see her. She was eager to hear gossip which, however, she felt she ought to despise. Moreover, she knew that if they talked that night they would talk as friends, and that Laurence would ever afterwards treat her with the familiarity of a friend. This she dreaded. Still, she knew that she would yield, at any rate, to the temptation to listen to gossip.

“I have put her to bed,” said Laurence, in a whisper, as she cautiously closed the door. “The poor woman! Oh, what a charming bracelet! It is a true pearl, naturally?”

Her roving eye had immediately, with an infallible instinct, caught sight of a bracelet which, in taking stock of her possessions, Sophia had accidentally left on the piano. She picked it up, and then put it down again.

“Yes,” said Sophia. She was about to add: “It’s nearly all the jewellery I possess”; but she stopped.

Laurence moved towards Sophia’s bed, and stood over it as she had often done in her quality of nurse. She had taken off her gloves, and she made a piquant, pretty show, with her thirty years, and her agreeable, slightly roguish face, in which were mingled the knowinguess of a street boy and the confidence of a woman who has ceased to be surprised at the influence of her snub nose on a highly intelligent man.

“Did she tell you what they had quarrelled about?” Laurence inquired abruptly. And not only the phrasing of the question, but the assured tone in which it was uttered, showed that Laurence meant to be the familiar of Sophia.

“Not a word!” said Sophia.

In this brief question and reply, all was crudely implied that had previously been supposed not to exist. The relations between the two women were altered irretrievably in a moment.

“It must have been her fault!” said Laurence. “With men she is insupportable. I have never understood how that poor woman has made her way. With women she is charming. But she seems to be incapable of not treating men like dogs. Some men adore that, but they are few. Is it not?”

Sophia smiled.

“I have told her! How many times have I told her! But it is useless. It is stronger than she is, and if she finishes on straw one will be able to say that it was because of that. But truly she ought not to have asked him here! Truly that was too much! If he knew . . . !”

“Why not?” asked Sophia, awkwardly. The answer startled her.

“Because her room has not been disinfected.”

“But I thought all the flat had been disinfected?”

“All except her room.”

“But why not her room?”

Laurence shrugged her shoulders. “She did not want to disturb her things! Is it that I know, I? She is like that. She takes an idea—and then, there you are!”

“She told me every room had been disinfected.”

“She told the same to the police and the doctor.”

“Then all the disinfection is useless?”

“Perfectly! But she is like that. This flat might be very remunerative; but with her, never! She has not even paid for the furniture—after two years!”

“But what will become of her?” Sophia asked.

“Ah—that!” Another shrug of the shoulders. “All that I know is that it will be necessary for me to leave here. The last time I brought Monsieur Cerf here, she was excessively rude to him. She has doubtless told you about Monsieur Cerf?”

“No. Who is Monsieur Cerf?”

“Ah! She has not told you? That astonishes me. Monsieur Cerf, that is my friend, you know.”

“Oh!” murmured Sophia.

“Yes,” Laurence proceeded, impelled by a desire to impress Sophia and to gossip at large. “That is my friend. I knew him at the hospital. It was to please him that I left the hospital. After that we quarrelled for two years; but at the end he gave me right. I did not budge. Two years! It is long. And I had left the hospital. I could have gone back. But I would not. That is not a life, to be nurse in a Paris hospital! No, I drew myself out as well as I could . . . He is the most charming boy you can imagine! And rich now; that is to say, relatively. He has a cousin infinitely more rich than he. I dined with them both tonight at the Maison Dorée. For a luxurious boy, he is a luxurious boy—the cousin I mean. It appears that he has made a fortune in Canada.”

“Truly!” said Sophia, with politeness. Laurence’s hand was playing on the edge of the bed, and Sophia observed for the first time that it bore a wedding-ring.

“You remark my ring?” Laurence laughed. “That is he—the cousin. ‘What!’ he said, ‘you do not wear an *alliance*? An *alliance* is more proper. We are going to arrange that after dinner.’ I said that all the jewellers’ shops would be closed. ‘That is all the same to me,’ he said. ‘We will open one.’ And in effect . . . it passed like that. He succeeded! Is it not beautiful?” She held forth her hand.

“Yes,” said Sophia. “It is very beautiful.”

“Yours also is beautiful,” said Laurence, with an extremely puzzling intonation.

“It is just the ordinary English wedding-ring,” said Sophia. In spite of herself she blushed.

“ ‘Now I have married you. It is I, the curé,’ said he—the cousin—when he put the ring on my finger. Oh, he is excessively amusing! He pleases me much. And he is all alone. He asked me whether I knew among my friends a sympathetic, pretty girl, to make four with us three for a picnic. I said I was not sure, but I thought not. Whom do I know? Nobody. I’m not a woman like the rest. I am always discreet. I do not like casual relations . . . But he is very well, the cousin. Brown eyes . . . It is an idea—will you come, one day? He speaks English. He loves the English. He is all that is most correct, the perfect gentleman. He would arrange a dazzling fête. I am sure he would be enchanted to make your acquaintance. Enchanted! . . . As for my Charles, happily he is completely mad about me—otherwise I should have fear.”

She smiled, and in her smile was a genuine respect for Sophia’s face.

“I fear I cannot come,” said Sophia. She honestly endeavoured to keep out of her reply any accent of moral superiority, but she did not quite succeed. She was not at all horrified by Laurence’s suggestion. She meant simply to refuse it; but she could not do so in a natural voice.

“It is true you are not yet strong enough,” said the imperturbable Laurence, quickly, and with a perfect imitation of naturalness. “But soon you must make a little promenade.” She stared at her ring. “After all, it is more proper,” she observed judicially. “With a wedding-ring one is less likely to be annoyed. What is curious is that the idea never before came to me. Yet . . .”

“You like jewellery?” said Sophia.

“If I like jewellery!”—with a gesture of the hands.

“Will you pass me that bracelet?”

Laurence obeyed, and Sophia clasped it round the girl’s wrist.

“Keep it,” Sophia said.

“For me?” Laurence exclaimed, ravished. “It is too much.”

“It is not enough,” said Sophia. “And when you look at it, you must remember how kind you were to me, and how grateful I am.”

“How nicely you say that!” Laurence said ecstatically.

And Sophia felt that she had indeed said it rather nicely. This giving of the bracelet, souvenir of one of the few capricious follies that Gerald had committed for her and not for himself, pleased Sophia very much.

“I am afraid your nursing of me forced you to neglect Monsieur Cerf,” she added.

“Yes, a little!” said Laurence, impartially, with a small pout of haughtiness. “It is true that he used to complain. But I soon put him straight. What an idea! He knows there are things upon which I do not joke. It is not he who will quarrel a second time! Believe me!”

Laurence’s absolute conviction of her power was what impressed Sophia. To Sophia she seemed to be a vulgar little piece of goods, with dubious charm and a glance that was far too brazen. Her movements were vulgar. And Sophia wondered how she had established her empire and upon what it rested.

“I shall not show this to Aimée,” whispered Laurence, indicating the bracelet.

“As you wish,” said Sophia.

“By the way, have I told you that war is declared?” Laurence casually remarked.

“No,” said Sophia. “What war?”

“The scene with Aimée made me forget it . . . With Germany. The city is quite excited. An immense crowd in front of the New Opéra. They say we shall be at Berlin in a month—or at most two months.”

“Oh!” Sophia muttered. “Why is there a war?”

“Ah! It is I who asked that. Nobody knows. It is those Prussians.”

“Don’t you think we ought to begin again with the disinfecting?” Sophia asked anxiously. “I must speak to Madame Foucault.”

Laurence told her not to worry, and went off to show the bracelet to Madame Foucault. She had privately decided that this was a pleasure which, after all, she could not deny herself.

IV

About a fortnight later—it was a fine Saturday in early August—Sophia, with a large pinafore over her dress, was finishing the portentous preparations for disinfecting the flat. Part of the affair was already accomplished, her own room and the corridor having been fumigated on the previous day, in spite of the opposition of Madame Foucault, who had taken amiss Laurence’s tale-bearing to Sophia. Laurence had left the flat—under exactly what circumstances Sophia knew not, but she guessed that it must have been in consequence of a scene elaborating the tiff caused by Madame Foucault’s resentment against Laurence. The brief, factitious friendliness between Laurence and Sophia had gone like a dream, and Laurence had gone like a dream. The servant had been dismissed; in her place Madame Foucault employed a charwoman each morning for two hours. Finally, Madame Foucault had been suddenly called away that morning by a letter to her sick father at St Mammès-sur-Seine. Sophia was delighted at the chance. The disinfecting of the flat had become an obsession with Sophia—the obsession of a convalescent whose perspective unconsciously twists things to the most wry shapes. She had had trouble on the day before with Madame Foucault, and she was expecting more serious trouble when the moment arrived for ejecting Madame Foucault as well as all her movable belongings from Madame Foucault’s own room. Nevertheless, Sophia had been determined, whatever should happen, to complete an honest fumigation of the entire flat. Hence the eagerness with which, urging Madame Foucault to go to her father, Sophia had protested that she was perfectly strong and could manage by herself for a couple of days. Owing to the partial suppression of the ordinary railway services in favour of military needs, Madame Foucault could not hope to go and return on the same day. Sophia had lent her a louis.

Pans of sulphur were mysteriously burning in each of the three front rooms, and two pairs of doors had been pasted over with paper, to prevent the fumes from escaping. The charwoman had departed. Sophia, with brush, scissors, flour-paste, and newssheets, was sealing the third pair of doors, when there was a ring at the front door.

She had only to cross the corridor in order to open.

It was Chirac. She was not surprised to see him. The outbreak of the war had induced even Sophia and her landlady to look through at least one newspaper during the day, and she had in this way learnt, from an article signed by Chirac, that he had returned to Paris after a mission into the Vosges country for his paper.

He started on seeing her. “Ah!” He breathed out the exclamation slowly. And then smiled, seized her hand, and kissed it.

The sight of his obvious extreme pleasure in meeting her again was the sweetest experience that had fallen

to Sophia for years.

"Then you are cured?"

"Quite."

He sighed. "You know, this is an enormous relief to me, to know, veritably, that you are no longer in danger. You gave me a fright . . . but a fright, my dear madame!"

She smiled in silence.

As he glanced inquiringly up and down the corridor, she said:

"I'm all alone in the flat. I'm disinfecting it."

"Then that is sulphur that I smell?"

She nodded. "Excuse me while I finish this door," she said.

He closed the front-door. "But you seem to be quite at home here!" he observed.

"I ought to be," said she.

He glanced again inquiringly up and down the corridor. "And you are really all alone now?" he asked, as though to be doubly sure.

She explained the circumstances.

"I owe you my most sincere excuses for bringing you here," he said confidentially.

"But why?" she replied, looking intently at her door. "They have been most kind to me. Nobody could have been kinder. And Madame Laurence being such a good nurse—"

"It is true," said he. "That was a reason. In effect they are both very good-natured little women . . . You comprehend, as journalist it arrives to me to know all kinds of people . . ." He snapped his fingers . . . "And as we were opposite the house. In fine, I pray you to excuse me . . ."

"Hold me this paper," she said. "It is necessary that every crack should be covered; also between the floor and the door."

"You English are wonderful," he murmured, as he took the paper. "Imagine you doing that! Then," he added, resuming the confidential tone, "I suppose you will leave the Foucault now, hein?"

"I suppose so," she said carelessly.

"You go to England?"

She turned to him, as she patted the creases out of a strip of paper with a duster, and shook her head.

"Not to England?"

"No."

"If it is not indiscreet, where are you going?"

"I don't know," she said candidly.

And she did not know. She was without a plan. Her brain told her that she ought to return to Bursley, or, at the least, write. But her pride would not hear of such a surrender. Her situation would have to be far more desperate than it was before she could confess her defeat to her family even in a letter. A thousand times no! That was a point which she had for ever decided. She would face any disaster, and any other shame, rather than the shame of her family's forgiving reception of her.

"And you?" she asked. "How does it go? This war?"

He told her, in a few words, a few leading facts about himself. "It must not be said," he added of the war, "but that will turn out ill! I—know, you comprehend."

"Truly?" she answered with casualness.

"You have heard nothing of him?" Chirac asked.

"Who? Gerald?"

He gave a gesture.

"Nothing! Not a word! Nothing!"

"He will have gone back to England!"

"Never!" she said positively.

"But why not?"

"Because he prefers France. He really does like France. I think it is the only real passion he ever had."

"It is astonishing," reflected Chirac, "how France is loved! And yet . . . ! But to live, what will he do? Must live!"

Sophia merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Then it is finished between you two?" he muttered awkwardly.

She nodded. She was on her knees, at the lower crack of the doors.

"There!" she said, rising. "It's well done, isn't it? That is all."

She smiled at him, facing him squarely, in the obscurity of the untidy and shabby corridor. Both felt that they had become very intimate. He was intensely flattered by her attitude, and she knew it.

"Now," she said, "I will take off my pinafore. Where can I niche you? There is only my bedroom, and I want that. What are we to do?"

"Listen," he suggested diffidently. "Will you do me the honour to come for a drive? That will do you good. There is sunshine. And you are always very pale."

"With pleasure," she agreed cordially.

While dressing, she heard him walking up and down the corridor; occasionally they exchanged a few words. Before leaving, Sophia pulled off the paper from one of the key-holes of the sealed suite of rooms, and they peered through, one after the other, and saw the green glow of the sulphur, and were troubled by its uncanniness. And then Sophia refixed the paper.

In descending the stairs of the house she felt the infirmity of her knees; but in other respects, though she had been out only once before since her illness, she was conscious of a sufficient strength. A disinclination for any enterprise had prevented her from taking the air as she ought to have done, but within the flat she had exercised her limbs in many small tasks. The little Chirac, nervously active and restless, wanted to take her arm, but she would not allow it.

The concierge and part of her family stared curiously at Sophia as she passed under the archway, for the course of her illness had excited the interest of the whole house. Just as the carriage was driving off, the concierge came across the pavement and paid her compliments, and then said:

"You do not know by hazard why Madame Foucault has not returned for lunch, madame?"

"Returned for lunch!" said Sophia. "She will not come back till tomorrow."

The concierge made a face. "Ah! How curious it is! She told my husband that she would return in two hours, it is very grave! Question of business."

"I know nothing, madame," said Sophia. She and Chirac looked at each other. The concierge murmured thanks and went off muttering indistinctly.

The fiacre turned down the Rue Laferrière, the horse slipping and sliding as usual over the cobblestones. Soon they were on the boulevard, making for the Champs Elysées and the Bois de Boulogne.

The fresh breeze and bright sunshine and the large freedom of the streets quickly intoxicated Sophia—intoxicated her, that is to say, in quite a physical sense. She was almost drunk, with the heady savour of life itself. A mild ecstasy of well-being overcame her. She saw the flat as a horrible, vile prison, and blamed herself for not leaving it sooner and oftener. The air was medicine, for body and mind too. Her perspective was instantly corrected. She was happy, living neither in the past nor in the future, but in and for that hour. And beneath her happiness moved a wistful melancholy for the Sophia who had suffered such a captivity and such woes. She yearned for more and yet more delight, for careless orgies of passionate pleasure, in the midst of which she would forget all trouble. Why had she refused the offer of Laurence? Why had she not rushed at once into the splendid fire of joyous indulgence, ignoring everything but the crude, sensuous instinct? Acutely aware as she was of her youth, her beauty, and her charm, she wondered at her refusal. She did not regret her refusal. She placidly observed it as the result of some tremendously powerful motive in herself, which could not be questioned or reasoned with—which was, in fact, the essential *her*.

"Do I look like an invalid?" she asked, leaning back luxuriously in the carriage among the crowd of other vehicles.

Chirac hesitated. "My faith! Yes!" he said at length. "But it becomes you. If I did not know that you have little love for compliments, I—"

"But I adore compliments!" she exclaimed. "What made you think that?"

"Well, then," he youthfully burst out, "you are more ravishing than ever."

She gave herself up deliciously to his admiration.

After a silence, he said: "Ah! if you knew how disquieted I was about you, away there . . . ! I should not know how to tell you. Veritably disquieted, you comprehend! What could I do? Tell me a little about your illness."

She recounted details.

As the fiacre entered the Rue Royale, they noticed a crowd of people in front of the Madeleine shouting and cheering.

The cabman turned towards them. "It appears there has been a victory!" he said.

"A victory! If only it was true!" murmured Chirac, cynically.

In the Rue Royale people were running frantically to and fro, laughing and gesticulating in glee. The customers in the cafés stood on their chairs, and even on tables, to watch, and occasionally to join in, the sudden fever. The fiacre was slowed to a walking pace. Flags and carpets began to show from the upper storeys of houses. The crowd grew thicker and more febrile. "Victory! Victory!" rang hoarsely, shrilly, and hoarsely again in the air.

"My God!" said Chirac trembling. "It must be a true victory! We are saved! We are saved! . . . Oh yes, it is true!"

"But naturally it is true! What are you saying?" demanded the driver.

At the Place de la Concorde the fiacre had to stop altogether. The immense square was a sea of white hats and flowers and happy faces, with carriages anchored like boats on its surface. Flag after flag waved out from neighbouring roofs in the breeze that tempered the August sun. Then hats began to go up, and cheers rolled across the square like echoes of firing in an enclosed valley. Chirac's driver jumped madly on to his seat, and cracked his whip.

"Vive la France!" he bawled with all the force of his lungs.

A thousand throats answered him.

Then there was a stir behind them. Another carriage was being slowly forced to the front. The crowd was pushing it, and crying, “Marseillaise! Marseillaise!” In the carriage was a woman alone; not beautiful, but distinguished, and with the assured gaze of one who is accustomed to homage and multitudinous applause.

“It is Gueymard!” said Chirac to Sophia. He was very pale. And he too shouted, “Marseillaise!” All his features were distorted.

The woman rose and spoke to her coachman, who offered his hand, and she climbed to the box seat, and stood on it and bowed several times.

“Marseillaise!” The cry continued. Then a roar of cheers, and then silence spread round the square like an inundation. And amid this silence the woman began to sing the Marseillaise. As she sang, the tears ran down her cheeks. Everybody in the vicinity was weeping or sternly frowning. In the pauses of the first verse could be heard the rattle of horses’ bits, or a whistle of a tug on the river. The refrain, signalled by a proud challenging toss of Gueymard’s head, leapt up like a tropical tempest, formidable, overpowering. Sophia, who had had no warning of the emotion gathering within her, sobbed violently. At the close of the hymn Gueymard’s carriage was assaulted by worshippers. All around, in the tumult of shouting, men were kissing and embracing each other; and hats went up continually in fountains. Chirac leaned over the side of the carriage and wrung the hand of a man who was standing by the wheel.

“Who is that?” Sophia asked, in an unsteady voice, to break the inexplicable tension within her.

“I don’t know,” said Chirac. He was weeping like a child. And he sang out: “Victory! To Berlin! Victory!”

V

Sophia walked alone, with tired limbs, up the damaged oak stairs to the flat. Chirac had decided that, in the circumstances of the victory, he would do well to go to the offices of his paper rather earlier than usual. He had brought her back to the Rue Bréda. They had taken leave of each other in a sort of dream or general enchantment due to their participation in the vast national delirium which somehow dominated individual feelings. They did not define their relations. They had been conscious only of emotion.

The stairs, which smelt of damp even in summer, disgusted Sophia. She thought of the flat with horror and longed for green places and luxury. On the landing were two stoutish, ill-dressed men, of middle age, apparently waiting. Sophia found her key and opened the door.

“Pardon, madame!” said one of the men, raising his hat, and they both pushed into the flat after her. They stared, puzzled, at the strips of paper pasted on the doors.

“What do you want?” she asked haughtily. She was very frightened. The extraordinary irruption brought her down with a shock to the scale of the individual.

“I am the concierge,” said the man who had addressed her. He had the air of a superior artisan. “It was my wife who spoke to you this afternoon. This,” pointing to his companion, “this is the law. I regret it, but . . .”

The law saluted and shut the door. Like the concierge the law emitted an odour—the odour of uncleanliness on a hot August day.

“The rent?” exclaimed Sophia.

“No, madame, not the rent: the furniture!”

Then she learnt the history of the furniture. It had belonged to the concierge, who had acquired it from a previous tenant and sold it on credit to Madame Foucault. Madame Foucault had signed bills and had not met them. She had made promises and broken them. She had done everything except discharge her liabilities. She had been warned and warned again. That day had been fixed as the last limit, and she had solemnly assured her creditor that on that day she would pay. On leaving the house she had stated precisely and clearly that she would return before lunch with all the money. She had made no mention of a sick father.

Sophia slowly perceived the extent of Madame Foucault’s duplicity and moral cowardice. No doubt the sick father was an invention. The woman, at the end of a tether which no ingenuity of lies could further lengthen, had probably absented herself solely to avoid the pain of witnessing the seizure. She would do anything, however silly, to avoid an immediate unpleasantness. Or perhaps she had absented herself without any particular aim, but simply in the hope that something fortunate might occur. Perhaps she had hoped that Sophia, taken unawares, would generously pay. Sophia smiled grimly.

“Well,” she said. “I can’t do anything. I suppose you must do what you have to do. You will let me pack up my own affairs?”

“Perfectly, madame!”

She warned them as to the danger of opening the sealed rooms. The man of the law seemed prepared to stay in the corridor indefinitely. No prospect of delay disturbed him.

Strange and disturbing, the triumph of the concierge! He was a locksmith by trade. He and his wife and their children lived in two little dark rooms by the archway—an insignificant fragment of the house. He was away from home about fourteen hours every day, except Sundays, when he washed the courtyard. All the other duties of the concierge were performed by the wife. The pair always looked poor, untidy, dirty, and rather forlorn. But they were steadily levying toll on everybody in the big house. They amassed money in forty ways. They lived for money, and all men have what they live for. With what arrogant gestures Madame

Foucault would descend from a carriage at the great door! What respectful attitudes and tones the ageing courtesan would receive from the wife and children of the concierge! But beneath these conventional fictions the truth was that the concierge held the whip. At last he was using it. And he had given himself a half-holiday in order to celebrate his second acquirement of the ostentatious furniture and the crimson lampshades. This was one of the dramatic crises in his career as a man of substance. The national thrill of victory had not penetrated into the flat with the concierge and the law. The emotions of the concierge were entirely independent of the Napoleonic foreign policy.

As Sophia, sick with a sudden disillusion, was putting her things together, and wondering where she was to go, and whether it would be politic to consult Chirac, she heard a fluster at the front door: cries, protestations, implorings. Her own door was thrust open, and Madame Foucault burst in.

“Save me!” exclaimed Madame Foucault, sinking to the ground.

The feeble theatricality of the gesture offended Sophia’s taste. She asked sternly what Madame Foucault expected her to do. Had not Madame Foucault knowingly exposed her, without the least warning, to the extreme annoyance of this visit of the law, a visit which meant practically that Sophia was put into the street?

“You must not be hard!” Madame Foucault sobbed.

Sophia learnt the complete history of the woman’s efforts to pay for the furniture: a farrago of folly and deceptions. Madame Foucault confessed too much. Sophia scorned confession for the sake of confession. She scorned the impulse which forces a weak creature to insist on its weakness, to revel in remorse, and to find an excuse for its conduct in the very fact that there is no excuse. She gathered that Madame Foucault had in fact gone away in the hope that Sophia, trapped, would pay; and that in the end, she had not even had the courage of her own trickery, and had run back, driven by panic into audacity, to fall at Sophia’s feet, lest Sophia might not have yielded and the furniture have been seized. From beginning to end the conduct of Madame Foucault had been fatuous and despicable and wicked. Sophia coldly condemned Madame Foucault for having allowed herself to be brought into the world with such a weak and maudlin character, and for having allowed herself to grow old and ugly. As a sight the woman was positively disgraceful.

“Save me!” she exclaimed again. “I did what I could for you!”

Sophia hated her. But the logic of the appeal was irresistible.

“But what can I do?” she asked reluctantly.

“Lend me the money. You can. If you don’t, this will be the end for me.”

“And a good thing, too!” thought Sophia’s hard sense.

“How much is it?” Sophia glumly asked.

“It isn’t a thousand francs!” said Madame Foucault with eagerness. “All my beautiful furniture will go for less than a thousand francs! Save me!”

She was nauseating Sophia.

“Please rise,” said Sophia, her hands fidgeting undecidedly.

“I shall repay you, surely!” Madame Foucault asseverated. “I swear!”

“Does she take me for a fool?” thought Sophia, “with her oaths!”

“No!” said Sophia. “I won’t lend you the money. But I tell you what I will do. I will buy the furniture at that price; and I will promise to resell it to you as soon as you can pay me. Like that, you can be tranquil. But I have very little money. I must have a guarantee. The furniture must be mine till you pay me.”

“You are an angel of charity!” cried Madame Foucault, embracing Sophia’s skirts. “I will do whatever you wish. Ah! You Englishwomen are astonishing.”

Sophia was not an angel of charity. What she had promised to do involved sacrifice and anxiety without the prospect of reward. But it was not charity. It was part of the price Sophia paid for the exercise of her logical faculty; she paid it unwillingly. “I did what I could for you!” Sophia would have died sooner than remind anyone of a benefit conferred, and Madame Foucault had committed precisely that enormity. The appeal was inexcusable to a fine mind; but it was effective.

The men were behind the door, listening. Sophia paid out of her stock of notes. Needless to say, the total was more and not less than a thousand francs. Madame Foucault grew rapidly confidential with the man. Without consulting Sophia, she asked the bailiff to draw up a receipt transferring the ownership of all the furniture to Sophia; and the bailiff, struck into obligingness by glimpses of Sophia’s beauty, consented to do so. There was much conferring upon forms of words, and flourishing of pens between thick vile fingers, and scattering of ink.

Before the men left Madame Foucault uncorked a bottle of wine for them, and helped them to drink it. Throughout the evening she was insupportably deferential to Sophia, who was driven to bed. Madame Foucault contentedly went up to the sixth floor to occupy the servant’s bedroom. She was glad to get so far away from the sulphur, of which a few faint fumes had penetrated into the corridor.

The next morning, after a stifling night of bad dreams, Sophia was too ill to get up. She looked round at the furniture in the little room, and she imagined the furniture in the other rooms, and dismally thought: “All this furniture is mine. She will never pay me! I am saddled with it.”

It was cheaply bought, but she probably could not sell it for even what she had paid. Still, the sense of ownership was reassuring.

The charwoman brought her coffee, and Chirac's newspaper; from which she learnt that the news of the victory which had sent the city mad on the previous day was utterly false. Tears came into her eyes as she gazed absently at all the curtained windows of the courtyard. She had youth and loveliness; according to the rules she ought to have been irresponsible, gay, and indulgently watched over by the wisdom of admiring age. But she felt towards the French nation as a mother might feel towards adorable, wilful children suffering through their own charming foolishness. She saw France personified in Chirac. How easily, despite his special knowledge, he had yielded to the fever! Her heart bled for France and Chirac on that morning of reaction and of truth. She could not bear to recall the scene in the Place de la Concorde. Madame Foucault had not descended.

CHAPTER VI

THE SIEGE

I

Madame Foucault came into Sophia's room one afternoon with a peculiar guilty expression on her large face, and she held her peignoir close to her exuberant body in folds consciously majestic, as though endeavouring to prove to Sophia by her carriage that despite her shifting eyes she was the most righteous and sincere woman that ever lived.

It was Saturday, the third of September, a beautiful day. Sophia, suffering from an unimportant relapse, had remained in a state of inactivity, and had scarcely gone out at all. She loathed the flat, but lacked the energy to leave it every day. There was no sufficiently definite object in leaving it. She could not go out and look for health as she might have looked for flowers. So she remained in the flat, and stared at the courtyard and the continual mystery of lives hidden behind curtains that occasionally moved. And the painted yellow walls of the house, and the papered walls of her room pressed upon her and crushed her. For a few days Chirac had called daily, animated by the most adorable solicitude. Then he had ceased to call. She had tired of reading the journals; they lay unopened. The relations between Madame Foucault and herself, and her status in the flat of which she now legally owned the furniture—these things were left unsettled. But the question of her board was arranged on the terms that she halved the cost of food and service with Madame Foucault; her expenses were thus reduced to the lowest possible—about eighteen francs a week. An idea hung in the air—like a scientific discovery on the point of being made by several independent investigators simultaneously—that she and Madame Foucault should co-operate in order to let furnished rooms at a remunerative profit. Sophia felt the nearness of the idea and she wanted to be shocked at the notion of any avowed association between herself and Madame Foucault; but she could not be.

"Here are a lady and a gentleman who want a bedroom," began Madame Foucault, "a nice large bedroom, furnished."

"Oh!" said Sophia; "who are they?"

"They will pay a hundred and thirty francs a month, in advance, for the middle bedroom."

"You've shown it to them already?" said Sophia. And her tone implied that somehow she was conscious of a right to overlook the affairs of Madame Foucault.

"No," said the other. "I said to myself that first I would ask you for a counsel."

"Then will they pay all that for a room they haven't seen?"

"The fact is," said Madame Foucault, sheepishly, "the lady has seen the room before. I know her a little. It is a former tenant. She lived here some weeks."

"In that room?"

"Oh no! She was poor enough then."

"Where are they?"

"In the corridor. She is very well, the lady. Naturally one must live, she like all the world; but she is veritably well. Quite respectable! One would never say . . . Then there would be the meals. We could demand one franc for the *café au lait*, two and a half francs for the lunch, and three francs for the dinner. Without counting other things. That would mean over five hundred francs a month, at least. And what would they cost us? Almost nothing! By what appears, he is a plutocrat . . . I could thus quickly repay you."

“Is it a married couple?”

“Ah! You know, one cannot demand the marriage certificate.” Madame Foucault indicated by a gesture that the Rue Bréda was not the paradise of saints.

“When she came before, this lady, was it with the same man?” Sophia asked coldly.

“Ah, my faith, no!” exclaimed Madame Foucault, bridling. “It was a bad sort, the other, a . . . ! Ah, no.”

“Why do you ask my advice?” Sophia abruptly questioned, in a hard, inimical voice. “Is it that it concerns me?”

Tears came at once into the eyes of Madame Foucault. “Do not be unkind,” she implored.

“I’m not unkind,” said Sophia, in the same tone.

“Shall you leave me if I accept this offer?”

There was a pause.

“Yes,” said Sophia, bluntly. She tried to be large-hearted, large-minded, and sympathetic; but there was no sign of these qualities in her speech.

“And if you take with you the furniture which is yours . . . !”

Sophia kept silence.

“How am I to live, I demand of you?” Madame Foucault asked weakly.

“By being respectable and dealing with respectable people!” said Sophia, uncompromisingly, in tones of steel.

“I am unhappy!” murmured the elder woman. “However, you are more strong than I!”

She brusquely dabbed her eyes, gave a little sob, and ran out of the room. Sophia listened at the door, and heard her dismiss the would-be tenants of the best bedroom. She wondered that she should possess such moral ascendancy over the woman, she so young and ingenuous! For, of course, she had not meant to remove the furniture. She could hear Madame Foucault sobbing quietly in one of the other rooms; and her lips curled.

Before evening a truly astonishing event happened. Perceiving that Madame Foucault showed no signs of bestirring herself, Sophia, with good nature in her heart but not on her tongue, went to her, and said:

“Shall I occupy myself with the dinner?”

Madame Foucault sobbed more loudly.

“That would be very amiable on your part,” Madame Foucault managed at last to reply, not very articulately.

Sophia put a hat on and went to the grocer’s. The grocer, who kept a busy establishment at the corner of the Rue Clausel, was a middle-aged and wealthy man. He had sent his young wife and two children to Normandy until victory over the Prussians should be more assured, and he asked Sophia whether it was true that there was a good bedroom to let in the flat where she lived. His servant was ill of smallpox; he was attacked by anxieties and fears on all sides; he would not enter his own flat on account of possible infection; he liked Sophia, and Madame Foucault had been a customer of his, with intervals, for twenty years. Within an hour he had arranged to rent the middle bedroom at eighty francs a month, and to take his meals there. The terms were modest, but the respectability was prodigious. All the glory of this tenancy fell upon Sophia.

Madame Foucault was deeply impressed. Characteristically she began at once to construct a theory that Sophia had only to walk out of the house in order to discover ideal tenants for the rooms. Also she regarded the advent of the grocer as a reward from Providence for her self-denial in refusing the profits of sinfulness. Sophia felt personally responsible to the grocer for his comfort, and so she herself undertook the preparation of the room. Madame Foucault was amazed at the thoroughness of her housewifery, and at the ingenuity of her ideas for the arrangement of furniture. She sat and watched with admiration sycophantic but real.

That night, when Sophia was in bed, Madame Foucault came into the room, and dropped down by the side of the bed, and begged Sophia to be her moral support for ever. She confessed herself generally. She explained how she had always hated the negation of respectability; how respectability was the one thing that she had all her life passionately desired. She said that if Sophia would be her partner in the letting of furnished rooms to respectable persons, she would obey her in everything. She gave Sophia a list of all the traits in Sophia’s character which she admired. She asked Sophia to influence her, to stand by her. She insisted that she would sleep on the sixth floor in the servant’s tiny room; and she had a vision of three bedrooms let to successful tradesmen. She was in an ecstasy of repentance and good intentions.

Sophia consented to the business proposition; for she had nothing else whatever in prospect, and she shared Madame Foucault’s rosy view about the remunerativeness of the bedrooms. With three tenants who took meals the two women would be able to feed themselves for nothing and still make a profit on the food; and the rents would be clear gain.

And she felt very sorry for the ageing, feckless Madame Foucault, whose sincerity was obvious. The association between them would be strange; it would have been impossible to explain it to St Luke’s Square . . . And yet, if there was anything at all in the virtue of Christian charity, what could properly be urged against the association?

“Ah!” murmured Madame Foucault, kissing Sophia’s hands, “it is today, then, that I recommence my life. You will see—you will see! You have saved me!”

It was a strange sight, the time-worn, disfigured courtesan, half prostrate before the beautiful young

creature proud and unassailable in the instinctive force of her own character. It was almost a didactic tableau, fraught with lessons for the vicious. Sophia was happier than she had been for years. She had a purpose in existence; she had a fluid soul to mould to her will according to her wisdom; and there was a large compassion to her credit. Public opinion could not intimidate her, for in her case there was no public opinion; she knew nobody; nobody had the right to question her doings.

The next day, Sunday, they both worked hard at the bedrooms from early morning. The grocer was installed in his chamber, and the two other rooms were cleansed as they had never been cleansed. At four o'clock, the weather being more magnificent than ever, Madame Foucault said:

"If we took a promenade on the boulevard?"

Sophia reflected. They were partners. "Very well," she agreed.

The boulevard was crammed with gay, laughing crowds. All the cafés were full. None, who did not know, could have guessed that the news of Sedan was scarcely a day old in the capital. Delirious joy reigned in the glittering sunshine. As the two women strolled along, content with their industry and their resolves, they came to a National Guard, who, perched on a ladder, was chipping away the "N" from the official sign of a court-tradesman. He was exchanging jokes with a circle of open mouths. It was in this way that Madame Foucault and Sophia learnt of the establishment of a republic.

"Vive la république!" cried Madame Foucault, incontinently, and then apologized to Sophia for the lapse.

They listened a long while to a man who was telling strange histories of the Empress.

Suddenly Sophia noticed that Madame Foucault was no longer at her elbow. She glanced about, and saw her in earnest conversation with a young man whose face seemed familiar. She remembered it was the young man with whom Madame Foucault had quarrelled on the night when Sophia found her prone in the corridor; the last remaining worshipper of the courtesan.

The woman's face was quite changed by her agitation. Sophia drew away, offended. She watched the pair from a distance for a few moments, and then, furious in disillusion, she escaped from the fever of the boulevards and walked quietly home. Madame Foucault did not return. Apparently Madame Foucault was doomed to be the toy of chance. Two days later Sophia received a scrawled letter from her, with the information that her lover had required that she should accompany him to Brussels, as Paris would soon be getting dangerous. "He adores me always. He is the most delicious boy. As I have always said, this is the grand passion of my life. I am happy. He would not permit me to come to you. He has spent two thousand francs on clothes for me, since naturally I had nothing." And so on. No word of apology. Sophia, in reading the letter, allowed for a certain exaggeration and twisting of the truth.

"Young fool! Fool!" she burst out angrily. She did not mean herself; she meant the fatuous adorer of that dilapidated, horrible woman. She never saw her again. Doubtless Madame Foucault fulfilled her own prediction as to her ultimate destiny, but in Brussels.

II

Sophia still possessed about a hundred pounds, and had she chosen to leave Paris and France, there was nothing to prevent her from doing so. Perhaps if she had chanced to visit the Gare St Lazare or the Gare du Nord, the sight of tens of thousands of people flying seawards might have stirred in her the desire to flee also from the vague coming danger. But she did not visit those termini; she was too busy looking after M. Niepce, her grocer. Moreover, she would not quit her furniture, which seemed to her to be a sort of rock. With a flat full of furniture she considered that she ought to be able to devise a livelihood; the enterprise of becoming independent was already indeed begun. She ardently wished to be independent, to utilize in her own behalf the gifts of organization, foresight, common sense, and tenacity which she knew she possessed and which had lain idle. And she hated the idea of flight.

Chirac returned as unexpectedly as he had gone; an expedition for his paper had occupied him. With his lips he urged her to go, but his eyes spoke differently. He had, one afternoon, a mood of candid despair, such as he would have dared to show only to one in whom he felt great confidence. "They will come to Paris," he said; "nothing can stop them. And . . . then . . . !" He gave a cynical laugh. But when he urged her to go she said:

"And what about my furniture? And I've promised M. Niepce to look after him."

Then Chirac informed her that he was without a lodging, and that he would like to rent one of her rooms. She agreed.

Shortly afterwards he introduced a middle-aged acquaintance named Carlier, the secretary-general of his newspaper, who wished to rent a bedroom. Thus by good fortune Sophia let all her rooms immediately, and was sure of over two hundred francs a month, apart from the profit on meals supplied. On this latter occasion Chirac (and his companion too) was quite optimistic, reiterating an absolute certitude that Paris could never be invested. Briefly, Sophia did not believe him. She believed the candidly despairing Chirac. She had no information, no wide theory, to justify her pessimism; nothing but the inward conviction that the race capable of behaving as she had seen it behave in the Place de la Concorde, was bound to be defeated. She loved the French race; but all the practical Teutonic sagacity in her wanted to take care of it in its difficulties, and was

rather angry with it for being so unfitted to take care of itself.

She let the men talk, and with careless disdain of their discussions and their certainties she went about her business of preparation. At this period, overworked and harassed by novel responsibilities and risks, she was happier, for days together, than she had ever been, simply because she had a purpose in life and was depending upon herself. Her ignorance of the military and political situation was complete; the situation did not interest her. What interested her was that she had three men to feed wholly or partially, and that the price of eatables was rising. She bought eatables. She bought fifty pecks of potatoes at a franc a peck, and another fifty pecks at a franc and a quarter—double the normal price; ten hams at two and a half francs a pound; a large quantity of tinned vegetables and fruits, a sack of flour, rice, biscuits, coffee, Lyons sausage, dried prunes, dried figs, and much wood and charcoal. But the chief of her purchases was cheese, of which her mother used to say that bread and cheese and water made a complete diet. Many of these articles she obtained from her grocer. All of them, except the flour and the biscuits, she stored in the cellar belonging to the flat; after several days' delay, for the Parisian workmen were too elated by the advent of a republic to stoop to labour, she caused a new lock to be fixed on the cellar-door. Her activities were the sensation of the house. Everybody admired, but no one imitated.

One morning, on going to do her marketing, she found a notice across the shuttered windows of her creamery in the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette: "Closed for want of milk." The siege had begun. It was in the closing of the creamery that the siege was figured for her; in this, and in eggs at five sous a piece. She went elsewhere for her milk and paid a franc a litre for it. That evening she told her lodgers that the price of meals would be doubled, and that if any gentleman thought that he could get equally good meals elsewhere, he was at liberty to get them elsewhere. Her position was strengthened by the appearance of another candidate for a room, a friend of Niepce. She at once offered him her own room, at a hundred and fifty francs a month.

"You see," she said, "there is a piano in it."

"But I don't play the piano," the man protested, shocked at the price.

"That is not my fault," she said.

He agreed to pay the price demanded for the room because of the opportunity of getting good meals much cheaper than in the restaurants. Like M. Niepce, he was a "siege-widower," his wife having been put under shelter in Brittany. Sophia took to the servant's bedroom on the sixth floor. It measured nine feet by seven, and had no window save a skylight; but Sophia was in a fair way to realize a profit of at least four pounds a week after paying for everything.

On the night when she installed herself in that chamber, amid a world of domestics and poor people, she worked very late, and the rays of her candles shot up intermittently through the skylight into a black heaven; at intervals she flitted up and down the stairs with a candle. Unknown to her a crowd gradually formed opposite the house in the street, and at about one o'clock in the morning a file of soldiers woke the concierge and invaded the courtyard, and every window was suddenly populated with heads. Sophia was called upon to prove that she was not a spy signalling to the Prussians. Three-quarters of an hour passed before her innocence was established and the staircases cleared of uniforms and dishevelled curiosity. The childish, impossible unreason of the suspicion against her completed in Sophia's mind the ruin of the reputation of the French people as a sensible race. She was extremely caustic the next day to her boarders. Except for this episode, the frequency of military uniforms in the streets, the price of food, and the fact that at least one house in four was flying either the ambulance flag or the flag of a foreign embassy (in an absurd hope of immunity from the impending bombardment) the siege did not exist for Sophia. The men often talked about their guard-duty, and disappeared for a day or two to the ramparts, but she was too busy to listen to them. She thought of nothing but her enterprise, which absorbed all her powers. She arose at six A.M., in the dark, and by seven-thirty M. Niepce and his friend had been served with breakfast, and much general work was already done. At eight o'clock she went out to market. When asked why she continued to buy at a high price, articles of which she had a store, she would reply: "I am keeping all that till things are much dearer." This was regarded as astounding astuteness.

On the fifteenth of October she paid the quarter's rent of the flat, four hundred francs, and was accepted as tenant. Her ears were soon quite accustomed to the sound of cannon, and she felt that she had always been a citizeness of Paris, and that Paris had always been besieged. She did not speculate about the end of the siege; she lived from day to day. Occasionally she had a qualm of fear, when the firing grew momentarily louder, or when she heard that battles had been fought in such and such a suburb. But then she said it was absurd to be afraid when you were with a couple of million people, all in the same plight as yourself. She grew reconciled to everything. She even began to like her tiny bedroom, partly because it was so easy to keep warm (the question of artificial heat was growing acute in Paris), and partly because it ensured her privacy. Down in the flat, whatever was done or said in one room could be more or less heard in all the others, owing to the prevalence of doors.

Her existence, in the first half of November, had become regular with a monotony almost absolute. Only the number of meals served to her boarders varied slightly from day to day. All these repasts, save now and then one in the evening, were carried into the bedrooms by the charwoman. Sophia did not allow herself to be seen much, except in the afternoons. Though Sophia continued to increase her prices, and was now selling her

stores at an immense profit, she never approached the prices current outside. She was very indignant against the exploitation of Paris by its shopkeepers, who had vast supplies of provender, and were hoarding for the rise. But the force of their example was too great for her to ignore it entirely; she contented herself with about half their gains. Only to M. Niepce did she charge more than to the others, because he was a shopkeeper. The four men appreciated their paradise. In them developed that agreeable feeling of security which solitary males find only under the roof of a landlady who is at once prompt, honest, and a votary of cleanliness. Sophia hung a slate near the front door, and on this slate they wrote their requests for meals, for being called, for laundrywork, etc. Sophia never made a mistake, and never forgot. The perfection of the domestic machine amazed these men, who had been accustomed to something quite different, and who every day heard harrowing stories of discomfort and swindling from their acquaintances. They even admired Sophia for making them pay, if not too high, still high. They thought it wonderful that she should tell them the price of all things in advance, and even show them how to avoid expense, particularly in the matter of warmth. She arranged rugs for each of them, so that they could sit comfortably in their rooms with nothing but a small charcoal heater for the hands. Quite naturally they came to regard her as the paragon and miracle of women. They endowed her with every fine quality. According to them there had never been such a woman in the history of mankind; there could not have been! She became legendary among their friends: a young and elegant creature, surpassingly beautiful, proud, queenly, unapproachable, scarcely visible, a marvellous manager, a fine cook and artificer of strange English dishes, utterly reliable, utterly exact and with habits of order . . . ! They adored the slight English accent which gave a touch of the exotic to her very correct and freely idiomatic French. In short, Sophia was perfect for them, an impossible woman. Whatever she did was right.

And she went up to her room every night with limbs exhausted, but with head clear enough to balance her accounts and go through her money. She did this in bed with thick gloves on. If often she did not sleep well, it was not because of the distant guns, but because of her preoccupation with the subject of finance. She was making money, and she wanted to make more. She was always inventing ways of economy. She was so anxious to achieve independence that money was always in her mind. She began to love gold, to love hoarding it, and to hate paying it away.

One morning her charwoman, who by good fortune was nearly as precise as Sophia herself, failed to appear. When the moment came for serving M. Niepce's breakfast, Sophia hesitated, and then decided to look after the old man personally. She knocked at his door, and went boldly in with the tray and candle. He started at seeing her; she was wearing a blue apron, as the charwoman did, but there could be no mistaking her for the charwoman. Niepce looked older in bed than when dressed. He had a rather ridiculous, undignified appearance, common among old men before their morning toilette is achieved; and a nightcap did not improve it. His rotund paunch lifted the bedclothes, upon which, for the sake of extra warmth, he had spread unmajestic garments. Sophia smiled to herself; but the contempt implied by that secret smile was softened by the thought: "Poor old man!" She told him briefly that she supposed the charwoman to be ill. He coughed and moved nervously. His benevolent and simple face beamed on her paternally as she fixed the tray by the bed.

"I really must open the window for one little second," she said, and did so. The chill air of the street came through the closed shutters, and the old man made a noise of shivering. She pushed back the shutters, and closed the window, and then did the same with the other two windows. It was almost day in the room.

"You will no longer need the candle," she said, and came back to the bedside to extinguish it.

The benign and fatherly old man put his arm round her waist. Fresh from the tonic of pure air, and with the notion of his ridiculousness still in her mind, she was staggered for an instant by this gesture. She had never given a thought to the temperament of the old grocer, the husband of a young wife. She could not always imaginatively keep in mind the effect of her own radiance, especially under such circumstances. But after an instant her precocious cynicism, which had slept, sprang up. "Naturally! I might have expected it!" she thought with blasting scorn.

"Take away your hand!" she said bitterly to the amiable old fool. She did not stir.

He obeyed, sheepishly.

"Do you wish to remain with me?" she asked, and as he did not immediately answer, she said in a most commanding tone: "Answer, then!"

"Yes," he said feebly.

"Well, behave properly."

She went towards the door.

"I wished only—" he stammered.

"I do not wish to know what you wished," she said.

Afterwards she wondered how much of the incident had been overheard. The other breakfasts she left outside the respective doors; and in future Niepce's also.

The charwoman never came again. She had caught smallpox and she died of it, thus losing a good situation. Strange to say, Sophia did not replace her; the temptation to save her wages and food was too strong. She could not, however, stand waiting for hours at the door of the official baker and the official butcher, one of a long line of frozen women, for the daily rations of bread and tri-weekly rations of meat. She employed the

concierge's boy, at two sous an hour, to do this. Sometimes he would come in with his hands so blue and cold that he could scarcely hold the precious cards which gave the right to the rations and which cost Chirac an hour or two of waiting at the mayoral offices each week. Sophia might have fed her flock without resorting to the official rations, but she would not sacrifice the economy which they represented. She demanded thick clothes for the concierge's boy, and received boots from Chirac, gloves from Carlier, and a great overcoat from Niepce. The weather increased in severity, and provisions in price. One day she sold to the wife of a chemist who lived on the first floor, for a hundred and ten francs, a ham for which she had paid less than thirty francs. She was conscious of a thrill of joy in receiving a beautiful bank-note and a gold coin in exchange for a mere ham. By this time her total cash resources had grown to nearly five thousand francs. It was astounding. And the reserves in the cellar were still considerable, and the sack of flour that encumbered the kitchen was still more than half full. The death of the faithful charwoman, when she heard of it, produced but little effect on Sophia, who was so overworked and so completely absorbed in her own affairs that she had no nervous energy to spare for sentimental regrets. The charwoman, by whose side she had regularly passed many hours in the kitchen, so that she knew every crease in her face and fold of her dress, vanished out of Sophia's memory.

Sophia cleaned and arranged two of the bedrooms in the morning, and two in the afternoon. She had stayed in hotels where fifteen bedrooms were in charge of a single chambermaid, and she thought it would be hard if she could not manage four in the intervals of cooking and other work. This she said to herself by way of excuse for not engaging another charwoman. One afternoon she was rubbing the brass knobs of the numerous doors in M. Niepce's room, when the grocer unexpectedly came in.

She glanced at him sharply. There was a self-conscious look in his eye. He had entered the flat noiselessly. She remembered having told him, in response to a question, that she now did his room in the afternoon. Why should he have left his shop? He hung up his hat behind the door, with the meticulous care of an old man. Then he took off his overcoat and rubbed his hands.

"You do well to wear gloves, madame," he said, "It is dog's weather."

"I do not wear them for the cold," she replied. "I wear them so as not to spoil my hands."

"Ah! truly! Very well! Very well! May I demand some wood? Where shall I find it? I do not wish to derange you."

She refused his help, and brought wood from the kitchen, counting the logs audibly before him.

"Shall I light the fire now?" she asked.

"I will light it," he said.

"Give me a match, please."

As she was arranging the wood and paper, he said: "Madame, will you listen to me?"

"What is it?"

"Do not be angry," he said. "Have I not proved that I am capable of respecting you? I continue in that respect. It is with all that respect that I say to you that I love you, madame . . . No, remain calm, I implore you!" The fact was that Sophia showed no sign of not remaining calm. "It is true that I have a wife. But what do you wish . . . ? She is far away. I love you madly," he proceeded with dignified respect. "I know I am old; but I am rich. I understand your character. You are a lady, you are decided, direct, sincere, and a woman of business. I have the greatest respect for you. One can talk to you as one could not to another woman. You prefer directness and sincerity. Madame, I will give you two thousand francs a month, and all you require from my shop, if you will be amiable to me. I am very solitary, I need the society of a charming creature who would be sympathetic. Two thousand francs a month. It is money."

He wiped his shiny head with his hand.

Sophia was bending over the fire. She turned her head towards him.

"Is that all?" she said quietly.

"You could count on my discretion," he said in a low voice. "I appreciate your scruples. I would come, very late, to your room on the sixth. One could arrange . . . You see, I am direct, like you."

She had an impulse to order him tempestuously out of the flat; but it was not a genuine impulse. He was an old fool. Why not treat him as such? To take him seriously would be absurd. Moreover, he was a very remunerative boarder.

"Do not be stupid," she said with cruel tranquillity. "Do not be an old fool."

And the benign but fatuous middle-aged lecher saw the enchanting vision of Sophia, with her natty apron and her amusing gloves, sweep and fade from the room. He left the house, and the expensive fire warmed an empty room.

Sophia was angry with him. He had evidently planned the proposal. If capable of respect, he was evidently also capable of chicane. But she supposed these Frenchmen were all alike: disgusting; and decided that it was useless to worry over a universal fact. They had simply no shame, and she had been very prudent to establish herself far away on the sixth floor. She hoped that none of the other boarders had overheard Niepce's outrageous insolence. She was not sure if Chirac was not writing in his room.

That night there was no sound of cannon in the distance, and Sophia for some time was unable to sleep. She woke up with a start, after a doze, and struck a match to look at her watch. It had stopped. She had forgotten

to wind it up, which omission indicated that the grocer had perturbed her more than she thought. She could not be sure how long she had slept. The hour might be two o'clock or it might be six o'clock. Impossible for her to rest! She got up and dressed (in case it should be as late as she feared) and crept down the interminable creaking stairs with the candle. As she descended, the conviction that it was the middle of the night grew upon her, and she stepped more swiftly. There was no sound save that caused by her footfalls. With her latchkey she cautiously opened the front door of the flat and entered. She could then hear the noisy ticking of the small, cheap clock in the kitchen. At the same moment another door creaked, and Chirac, with hair all tousled, but fully dressed, appeared in the corridor.

"So you have decided to sell yourself to him!" Chirac whispered.

She drew away instinctively, and she could feel herself blushing. She was at a loss. She saw that Chirac was in a furious rage, tremendously moved. He crept towards her, half crouching. She had never seen anything so theatrical as his movement, and the twitching of his face. She felt that she too ought to be theatrical, that she ought nobly to scorn his infamous suggestion, his unwarrantable attack. Even supposing that she had decided to sell herself to the old pasha, did that concern him? A dignified silence, an annihilating glance, were all that he deserved. But she was not capable of this heroic behaviour.

"What time is it?" she added weakly.

"Three o'clock," Chirac sneered.

"I forgot to wind up my watch," she said. "And so I came down to see."

"In effect!" He spoke sarcastically, as if saying: "I've waited for you, and here you are."

She said to herself that she owed him nothing, but all the time she felt that he and she were the only young people in that flat, and that she did owe to him the proof that she was guiltless of the supreme dishonour of youth. She collected her forces and looked at him.

"You should be ashamed," she said. "You will wake the others."

"And M. Niepce—will he need to be wakened?"

"M. Niepce is not here," she said.

Niepce's door was unlatched. She pushed it open and went into the room, which was empty and bore no sign of having been used.

"Come and satisfy yourself!" she insisted.

Chirac did so. His face fell.

She took her watch from her pocket.

"And now wind my watch, and set it, please."

She saw that he was in anguish. He could not take the watch. Tears came into his eyes. Then he hid his face, and dashed away. She heard a sob-impeded murmur that sounded like, "Forgive me!" and the banging of a door. And in the stillness she heard the regular snoring of M. Carlier. She too cried. Her vision was blurred by a mist, and she stumbled into the kitchen and seized the clock, and carried it with her upstairs, and shivered in the intense cold of the night. She wept gently for a very long time. "What a shame! What a shame!" she said to herself. Yet she did not quite blame Chirac. The frost drove her into bed, but not to sleep. She continued to cry. At dawn her eyes were inflamed with weeping. She was back in the kitchen then. Chirac's door was wide open. He had left the flat. On the slate was written, "I shall not take meals today."

III

Their relations were permanently changed. For several days they did not meet at all; and when at the end of the week Chirac was obliged at last to face Sophia in order to pay his bill, he had a most grievous expression. It was obvious that he considered himself a criminal without any defence to offer for his crime. He seemed to make no attempt to hide his state of mind. But he said nothing. As for Sophia, she preserved a mien of amiable cheerfulness. She exerted herself to convince him by her attitude that she bore no resentment, that she had determined to forget the incident, that in short she was the forgiving angel of his dreams. She did not, however, succeed entirely in being quite natural. Confronted by his misery, it would have been impossible for her to be quite natural, and at the same time quite cheerful!

A little later the social atmosphere of the flat began to grow querulous, disputatious, and perverse. The nerves of everybody were seriously strained. This applied to the whole city. Days of heavy rains followed the sharp frosts, and the town was, as it were, sodden with woe. The gates were closed. And though nine-tenths of the inhabitants never went outside the gates, the definite and absolute closing of them demoralized all hearts. Gas was no longer supplied. Rats, cats, and thorough-bred horses were being eaten and pronounced "not bad." The siege had ceased to be a novelty. Friends did not invite one another to a "siege-dinner" as to a picnic. Sophia, fatigued by regular overwork, became weary of the situation. She was angry with the Prussians for dilatoriness, and with the French for inaction, and she poured out her English spleen on her boarders. The boarders told each other in secret that the *patronne* was growing formidable. Chiefly she bore a grudge against the shopkeepers; and when, upon a rumour of peace, the shop-windows one day suddenly blossomed with prodigious quantities of all edibles, at highest prices, thus proving that the famine was artificially created, Sophia was furious. M. Niepce in particular, though he sold goods to her at a special discount, suffered

indignities. A few days later that benign and fatherly man put himself lamentably in the wrong by attempting to introduce into his room a charming young creature who knew how to be sympathetic. Sophia, by an accident unfortunate for the grocer, caught them in the corridor. She was beside herself, but the only outward symptoms were a white face and a cold, steely voice that grated like a rasp on the susceptibilities of the adherents of Aphrodite. At this period Sophia had certainly developed into a termagant—without knowing it!

She would often insist now on talking about the siege and hearing everything that the men could tell her. Her comments, made without the least regard for the justifiable delicacy of their feelings as Frenchmen, sometimes led to heated exchanges. When all Montmartre and the Quartier Bréda was impassioned by the appearance from outside of the Thirty-second battalion, she took the side of the populace, and would not credit the solemn statement of the journalists, proved by documents, that these maltreated soldiers were not cowards in flight. She supported the women who had spit in the faces of the Thirty-second. She actually said that if she had met them, she would have spit too. Really she was convinced of the innocence of the Thirty-second, but something prevented her from admitting it. The dispute ended with high words between herself and Chirac.

The next day Chirac came home at an unusual hour, knocked at the kitchen door, and said:

"I must give notice to leave you."

"Why?" she demanded curtly.

She was kneading flour and water for a potato-cake. Her potato-cakes were the joy of the household.

"My paper has stopped!" said Chirac.

"Oh!" she added thoughtfully, but not looking at him. "That is no reason why you should leave."

"Yes," he said. "This place is beyond my means. I do not need to tell you that in ceasing to appear the paper has omitted to pay its debts. The house owes me a month's salary. So I must leave."

"No!" said Sophia. "You can pay me when you have money."

He shook his head. "I have no intention of accepting your kindness."

"Haven't you got any money?" she abruptly asked.

"None," said he. "It is the disaster—quite simply!"

"Then you will be forced to get into debt somewhere."

"Yes, but not here! Not to you!"

"Truly, Chirac," she exclaimed, with a cajoling voice, "you are not reasonable."

"Nevertheless it is like that!" he said with decision.

"Eh, well!" she turned on him menacingly. "It will not be like that! You understand me? You will stay. And you will pay me when you can. Otherwise we shall quarrel. Do you imagine I shall tolerate your childishness? Just because you were angry last night—"

"It is not that," he protested. "You ought to know it is not that." (She did.) "It is solely that I cannot permit myself to—"

"Enough!" she cried peremptorily, stopping him. And then in a quieter tone, "And what about Carlier? Is he also in the ditch?"

"Ah, he has money," said Chirac, with sad envy.

"You also, one day," said she. "You stop—in any case until after Christmas, or we quarrel. Is it agreed?" Her accent had softened.

"You are too good!" he yielded. "I cannot quarrel with you. But it pains me to accept—"

"Oh!" she snapped, dropping into the vulgar idiom, "you make me sweat with your stupid pride. Is it that that you call friendship? Go away now. How do you wish that I should succeed with this cake while you station yourself there to distract me?"

IV

But in three days Chirac, with amazing luck, fell into another situation, and on the *Journal des Débâts*. It was the Prussians who had found him a place. The celebrated Payenneville, second greatest *chroniqueur* of his time, had caught a cold while doing his duty as a national guard, and had died of pneumonia. The weather was severe again; soldiers were being frozen to death at Aubervilliers. Payenneville's position was taken by another man, whose post was offered to Chirac. He told Sophia of his good fortune with unconcealed vanity.

"You with your smile!" she said impatiently. "One can refuse you nothing!"

She behaved just as though Chirac had disgusted her. She humbled him. But with his fellow-lodgers his airs of importance as a member of the editorial staff of the *Débâts* were comical in their ingenuousness. On the very same day Carlier gave notice to leave Sophia. He was comparatively rich; but the habits which had enabled him to arrive at independence in the uncertain vocation of a journalist would not allow him, while he was earning nothing, to spend a sou more than was absolutely necessary. He had decided to join forces with a widowed sister, who was accustomed to parsimony as parsimony is understood in France, and who was living on hoarded potatoes and wine.

"There!" said Sophia, "you have lost me a tenant!"

And she insisted, half jocularly and half seriously, that Carlier was leaving because he could not stand

Chirac's infantile conceit. The flat was full of acrimonious words.

On Christmas morning Chirac lay in bed rather late; the newspapers did not appear that day. Paris seemed to be in a sort of stupor. About eleven o'clock he came to the kitchen door.

"I must speak with you," he said. His tone impressed Sophia.

"Enter," said she.

He went in, and closed the door like a conspirator. "We must have a little fête," he said. "You and I."

"Fête!" she repeated. "What an idea! How can I leave?"

If the idea had not appealed to the secrecies of her heart, stirring desires and souvenirs upon which the dust of time lay thick, she would not have begun by suggesting difficulties; she would have begun by a flat refusal.

"That is nothing," he said vigorously. "It is Christmas, and I must have a chat with you. We cannot chat here. I have not had a true little chat with you since you were ill. You will come with me to a restaurant for lunch."

She laughed. "And the lunch of my lodgers?"

"You will serve it a little earlier. We will go out immediately afterwards, and we will return in time for you to prepare dinner. It is quite simple."

She shook her head. "You are mad," she said crossly.

"It is necessary that I should offer you something," he went on scowling. "You comprehend me? I wish you to lunch with me today. I demand it, and you are not going to refuse me."

He was very close to her in the little kitchen, and he spoke fiercely, bullyingly, exactly as she had spoken to him when insisting that he should live on credit with her for a while.

"You are very rude," she parried.

"If I am rude, it is all the same to me," he held out uncompromisingly. "You will lunch with me; I hold to it."

"How can I be dressed?" she protested.

"That does not concern me. Arrange that as you can."

It was the most curious invitation to a Christmas dinner imaginable.

At a quarter past twelve they issued forth side by side, heavily clad, into the mournful streets. The sky, slate-coloured, presaged snow. The air was bitterly cold, and yet damp. There were no fiacres in the little three-cornered place which forms the mouth of the Rue Clausel. In the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, a single empty omnibus was toiling up the steep glassy slope, the horses slipping and recovering themselves in response to the whipcracking, which sounded in the streets as in an empty vault. Higher up, in the Rue Fontaine, one of the few shops that were open displayed this announcement: "*A large selection of cheeses for New Year's gifts*." They laughed.

"Last year at this moment," said Chirac, "I was thinking of only one thing—the masked ball at the opera. I could not sleep after it. This year even the churches are not open. And you?"

She put her lips together. "Do not ask me," she said.

They proceeded in silence.

"We are triste, we others," he said. "But the Prussians, in their trenches, they cannot be so gay, either! Their families and their Christmas trees must be lacking to them. Let us laugh!"

The Place Blanche and the Boulevard de Clichy were no more lively than the lesser streets and squares. There was no life anywhere, scarcely a sound; not even the sound of cannon. Nobody knew anything; Christ mas had put the city into a lugubrious trance of hopelessness. Chirac took Sophia's arm across the Place Blanche, and a few yards up the Rue Lepic he stopped at a small restaurant, famous among the initiated, and known as "The Little Louis." They entered, descending by two steps into a confined and sombrely picturesque interior.

Sophia saw that they were expected. Chirac must have paid a previous visit to the restaurant that morning. Several disordered tables showed that people had already lunched, and left; but in the corner was a table for two, freshly laid in the best manner of such restaurants; that is to say, with a red-and-white checked cloth, and two other red-and-white cloths, almost as large as the table-cloth, folded as serviettes and arranged flat on two thick plates between solid steel cutlery; a salt-cellar, out of which one ground rock-salt by turning a handle, a pepper-castor, two knife-rests, and two common tumblers. The phenomena which differentiated this table from the ordinary table were a champagne bottle and a couple of champagne glasses. Champagne was one of the few items which had not increased in price during the siege.

The landlord and his wife were eating in another corner, a fat, slatternly pair, whom no privations of a siege could have emaciated. The landlord rose. He was dressed as a chef, all in white, with the sacred cap; but a soiled white. Everything in the place was untidy, unkempt and more or less unclean, except just the table upon which champagne was waiting. And yet the restaurant was agreeable, reassuring. The landlord greeted his customers as honest friends. His greasy face was honest, and so was the pale, weary, humorous face of his wife. Chirac saluted her.

"You see," said she, across from the other corner, indicating a bone on her plate. "This is Diane!"

"Ah! the poor animal!" exclaimed Chirac, sympathetically.

"What would you?" said the landlady. "It cost too dear to feed her. And she was so *mignonne*! One could not

watch her grow thin!"

"I was saying to my wife," the landlord put in, "how she would have enjoyed that bone—Diane!" He roared with laughter.

Sophia and the landlady exchanged a curious sad smile at this pleasantry, which had been re-discovered by the landlord for perhaps the thousandth time during the siege, but which he evidently regarded as quite new and original.

"Eh, well!" he continued confidentially to Chirac. "I have found for you something very good—half a duck." And in a still lower tone: "And it will not cost you too dear."

No attempt to realize more than a modest profit was ever made in that restaurant. It possessed a regular *clientèle* who knew the value of the little money they had, and who knew also how to appreciate sincere and accomplished cookery. The landlord was the chef, and he was always referred to as the chef, even by his wife.

"How did you get that?" Chirac asked.

"Ah!" said the landlord, mysteriously. "I have one of my friends, who comes from Villeneuve St Georges—refugee, you know. In fine . . ." A wave of the fat hands, suggesting that Chirac should not inquire too closely.

"In effect!" Chirac commented. "But it is very chic, that!"

"I believe you that it is *chic*!" said the landlady, sturdily.

"It is charming," Sophia murmured politely.

"And then a quite little salad!" said the landlord.

"But that—that is still more striking!" said Chirac.

The landlord winked. The fact was that the commerce which resulted in fresh green vegetables in the heart of a beleaguered town was notorious.

"And then also a quite little cheese!" said Sophia, slightly imitating the tone of the landlord, as she drew from the inwardness of her cloak a small round parcel. It contained a Brie cheese, in fairly good condition. It was worth at least fifty francs, and it had cost Sophia less than two francs. The landlady joined the landlord in inspecting this wondrous jewel. Sophia seized a knife and cut a slice for the landlady's table.

"Madame is too good!" said the landlady, confused by this noble generosity, and bearing the gift off to her table as a fox-terrier will hurriedly seek solitude with a sumptuous morsel. The landlord beamed. Chirac was enchanted. In the intimate and unaffected cosiness of that interior the vast, stupefied melancholy of the city seemed to be forgotten, to have lost its sway.

Then the landlord brought a hot brick for the feet of madame. It was more an acknowledgement of the slice of cheese than a necessity, for the restaurant was very warm; the tiny kitchen opened directly into it, and the door between the two was open; there was no ventilation whatever.

"It is a friend of mine," said the landlord, proudly, in the way of gossip, as he served an undescribed soup, "a butcher in the Faubourg St Honoré, who has bought the three elephants of the Jardin des Plantes for twenty-seven thousand francs."

Eyebrows were lifted. He uncorked the champagne.

As she drank the first mouthful (she had long lost her youthful aversion for wine), Sophia had a glimpse of herself in a tilted mirror hung rather high on the opposite wall. It was several months since she had attired herself with ceremoniousness. The sudden unexpected vision of elegance and pallid beauty pleased her. And the instant effect of the champagne was to renew in her mind a forgotten conception of the goodness of life and of the joys which she had so long missed.

V

At half past two they were alone in the little salon of the restaurant, and vaguely in their dreamy and feverish minds that were too preoccupied to control with precision their warm, relaxed bodies, there floated the illusion that the restaurant belonged to them and that in it they were at home. It was no longer a restaurant, but a retreat and shelter from hard life. The chef and his wife were dozing in an inner room. The champagne was drunk; the adorable cheese was eaten; and they were sipping Marc de Bourgogne. They sat at right angles to one another, close to one another, with brains aswing; full of good nature and quick sympathy; their flesh content and yet expectant. In a pause of the conversation (which, entirely banal and fragmentary, had seemed to reach the acme of agreeableness), Chirac put his hand on the hand of Sophia as it rested limp on the littered table. Accidentally she caught his eye; she had not meant to do so. They both became self-conscious. His thin, bearded face had more than ever that wistfulness which always softened towards him the uncompromisingness of her character. He had the look of a child. For her, Gerald had sometimes shown the same look. But indeed she was now one of those women for whom all men, and especially all men in a tender mood, are invested with a certain incurable quality of childishness. She had not withdrawn her hand at once, and so she could not withdraw it at all.

He gazed at her with timid audacity. Her eyes were liquid.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I was asking myself what I should have done if you had refused to come."

"And what *should* you have done?"

“Assuredly something terribly inconvenient,” he replied, with the large importance of a man who is in the domain of pure supposition. He leaned towards her. “My very dear friend,” he said in a different voice, getting bolder.

It was infinitely sweet to her, voluptuously sweet, this basking in the heat of temptation. It certainly did seem to her, then, the one real pleasure in the world. Her body might have been saying to his: “See how ready I am!” Her body might have been saying to his: “Look into my mind. For you I have no modesty. Look and see all that is there.” The veil of convention seemed to have been rent. Their attitude to each other was almost that of lover and mistress, between whom a single glance may be charged with the secrets of the past and promises for the future. Morally she was his mistress in that moment.

He released her hand and put his arm round her waist.

“I love thee,” he whispered with great emotion.

Her face changed and hardened. “You must not do that,” she said, coldly, unkindly, harshly. She scowled. She would not abate one crease in her forehead to the appeal of his surprised glance. Yet she did not want to repulse him. The instinct which repulsed him was not within her control. Just as a shy man will obstinately refuse an invitation which he is hungering to accept, so, though not from shyness, she was compelled to repulse Chirac. Perhaps if her desires had not been laid to sleep by excessive physical industry and nervous strain, the sequel might have been different.

Chirac, like most men who have once found a woman weak, imagined that he understood women profoundly. He thought of women as the Occidental thinks of the Chinese, as a race apart, mysterious but capable of being infallibly comprehended by the application of a few leading principles of psychology. Moreover he was in earnest; he was hard driven, and he was honest. He continued, respectfully obedient in withdrawing his arm:

“Very dear friend,” he urged with undaunted confidence, “you must know that I love you.”

She shook her head impatiently, all the time wondering what it was that prevented her from slipping into his arms. She knew that she was treating him badly by this brusque change of front; but she could not help it. Then she began to feel sorry for him.

“We have been very good friends,” he said. “I have always admired you enormously. I did not think that I should dare to love you until that day when I overheard that old villain Niepce make his advances. Then, when I perceived my acute jealousy, I knew that I was loving you. Ever since, I have thought only of you. I swear to you that if you will not belong to me, it is already finished for me! Altogether! Never have I seen a woman like you! So strong, so proud, so kind, and so beautiful! You are astonishing, yes, astonishing! No other woman could have drawn herself out of an impossible situation as you have done, since the disappearance of your husband. For me, you are a woman unique. I am very sincere. Besides, you know it . . . Dear friend!”

She shook her head passionately.

She did not love him. But she was moved. And she wanted to love him. She wanted to yield to him, only liking him, and to love afterwards. But this obstinate instinct held her back.

“I do not say, now,” Chirac went on. “Let me hope.”

The Latin theatricality of his gestures and his tone made her sorrowful for him.

“My poor Chirac!” she plaintively murmured, and began to put on her gloves.

“I shall hope!” he persisted.

She pursed her lips. He seized her violently by the waist. She drew her face away from his, firmly. She was not hard, not angry now. Disconcerted by her compassion, he loosed her.

“My poor Chirac,” she said, “I ought not to have come. I must go. It is perfectly useless. Believe me.”

“No, no!” he whispered fiercely.

She stood up and the abrupt movement pushed the table gratingly across the floor. The throbbing spell of the flesh was snapped like a stretched string, and the scene over. The landlord, roused from his doze, stumbled in. Chirac had nothing but the bill as a reward for his pains. He was baffled.

They left the restaurant, silently, with a foolish air.

Dusk was filling on the mournful streets, and the lamplighters were lighting the miserable oil lamps that had replaced gas. They two, and the lamplighters, and an omnibus were alone in the streets. The gloom was awful; it was desolating. The universal silence seemed to be the silence of despair. Steeped in woe, Sophia thought wearily upon the hopeless problem of existence. For it seemed to her that she and Chirac had created this woe out of nothing, and yet it was an incurable woe!

CHAPTER VII

SUCCESS

I

Sophia lay awake one night in the room lately quitted by Carlier. That silent negation of individuality had come and gone, and left scarcely any record of himself either in his room or in the memories of those who had surrounded his existence in the house. Sophia had decided to descend from the sixth floor, partly because the temptation of a large room, after months in a cubicle, was rather strong; but more because of late she had been obliged to barricade the door of the cubicle with a chest of drawers, owing to the propensities of a new tenant of the sixth floor. It was useless to complain to the concierge; the sole effective argument was the chest of drawers, and even that was frailer than Sophia could have wished. Hence, finally, her retreat.

She heard the front door of the flat open; then it was shut with nervous violence. The resonance of its closing would have certainly wakened less accomplished sleepers than M. Niepce and his friend, whose snores continued with undisturbed regularity. After a pause of shuffling, a match was struck, and feet crept across the corridor with the most exaggerated precautions against noise. There followed the unintentional bang of another door. It was decidedly the entry of a man without the slightest natural aptitude for furtive irruptions. The clock in M. Niepce's room, which the grocer had persuaded to exact time-keeping, chimed three with its delicate *ting*.

For several days past Chirac had been mysteriously engaged very late at the bureaux of the *Débâts*. No one knew the nature of his employment; he said nothing, except to inform Sophia that he would continue to come home about three o'clock until further notice. She had insisted on leaving in his room the materials and apparatus for a light meal. Naturally he had protested, with the irrational obstinacy of a physically weak man who sticks to it that he can defy the laws of nature. But he had protested in vain.

His general conduct since Christmas Day had frightened Sophia, in spite of her tendency to stifle alarms at their birth. He had eaten scarcely anything at all, and he went about with the face of a man dying of a broken heart. The change in him was indeed tragic. And instead of improving, he grew worse. "Have I done this?" Sophia asked herself. "It is impossible that I should have done this! It is absurd and ridiculous that he should behave so!" Her thoughts were employed alternately in sympathizing with him and in despising him, in blaming herself and in blaming him. When they spoke, they spoke awkwardly, as though one or both of them had committed a shameful crime, which could not even be mentioned. The atmosphere of the flat was tainted by the horror. And Sophia could not offer him a bowl of soup without wondering how he would look at her or avoid looking, and without carefully arranging in advance her own gestures and speech. Existence was a nightmare of self-consciousness.

"At last they have unmasked their batteries!" he had exclaimed with painful gaiety two days after Christmas, when the besiegers had recommenced their cannonade. He tried to imitate the strange, general joy of the city, which had been roused from apathy by the recurrence of a familiar noise; but the effort was a deplorable failure. And Sophia condemned not merely the failure of Chirac's imitation, but the thing imitated. "Childish!" she thought. Yet, despise the feebleness of Chirac's behaviour as she might, she was deeply impressed, genuinely astonished, by the gravity and persistence of the symptoms. "He must have been getting himself into a state about me for a long time," she thought. "Surely he could not have gone mad like this all in a day or two! But I never noticed anything. No; honestly I never noticed anything!" And just as her behaviour in the restaurant had shaken Chirac's confidence in his knowledge of the other sex, so now the singular behaviour of Chirac shook hers. She was taken aback. She was frightened, though she pretended not to be frightened.

She had lived over and over again the scene in the restaurant. She asked herself over and over again if really she had not beforehand expected him to make love to her in the restaurant. She could not decide exactly when she had begun to expect a declaration; but probably a long time before the meal was finished. She had foreseen it, and might have stopped it. But she had not chosen to stop it. Curiosity concerning not merely him, but also herself, had tempted her tacitly to encourage him. She asked herself over and over again why she had repulsed him. It struck her as curious that she had repulsed him. Was it because she was a married woman? Was it because she had moral scruples? Was it at bottom because she did not care for him? Was it because she could not care for anybody? Was it because his fervid manner of love-making offended her English phlegm? And did she feel pleased or displeased by his forbearance in not renewing the assault? She could not answer. She did not know.

But all the time she knew that she wanted love. Only, she conceived a different kind of love: placid, regular, somewhat stern, somewhat above the plane of whims, moods, caresses, and all mere fleshly contacts. Not that she considered that she despised these things (though she did)! What she wanted was a love that was too proud, too independent, to exhibit frankly either its joy or its pain. She hated a display of sentiment. And

even in the most intimate abandonments she would have made reserves, and would have expected reserves, trusting to a lover's powers of divination, and to her own! The foundation of her character was a haughty moral independence, and this quality was what she most admired in others.

Chirac's inability to draw from his own pride strength to sustain himself against the blow of her refusal gradually killed in her the sexual desire which he had aroused, and which during a few days flickered up under the stimulus of fancy and of regret. Sophia saw with increasing clearness that her unreasoning instinct had been right in saying him nay. And when, in spite of this, regrets still visited her, she would comfort herself in thinking: "I cannot be bothered with all that sort of thing. It is not worth while. What does it lead to? Is not life complicated enough without that? No, no! I will stay as I am. At any rate I know what I am in for, as things are!" And she would reflect upon her hopeful financial situation, and the approaching prospect of a constantly sufficient income. And a little thrill of impatience against the interminable and gigantic foolishness of the siege would take her.

But her self-consciousness in presence of Chirac did not abate.

As she lay in bed she awaited accustomed sounds which should have connoted Chirac's definite retirement for the night. Her ear, however, caught no sound whatever from his room. Then she imagined that there was a smell of burning in the flat. She sat up, and sniffed anxiously, of a sudden wideawake and apprehensive. And then she was sure that the smell of burning was not in her imagination. The bedroom was in perfect darkness. Feverishly she searched with her right hand for the matches on the nighttable, and knocked candle-stick and matches to the floor. She seized her dressing-gown, which was spread over the bed, and put it on, aiming for the door. Her feet were bare. She discovered the door. In the passage she could discern nothing at first, and then she made out a thin line of light, which indicated the bottom of Chirac's door. The smell of burning was strong and unmistakable. She went towards the faint light, fumbled for the doorhandle with her palm, and opened. It did not occur to her to call out and ask what was the matter.

The house was not on fire; but it might have been. She had left on the table at the foot of Chirac's bed a small cooking-lamp, and a saucepan of bouillon. All that Chirac had to do was to ignite the lamp and put the saucepan on it. He had ignited the lamp, having previously raised the double wicks, and had then dropped into the chair by the table just as he was, and sunk forward and gone to sleep with his head lying sideways on the table. He had not put the saucepan on the lamp; he had not lowered the wicks, and the flames, capped with thick black smoke, were waving slowly to and fro within a few inches of his loose hair. His hat had rolled along the floor; he was wearing his great overcoat and one woollen glove; the other glove had lodged on his slanting knee. A candle was also burning.

Sophia hastened forward, as it were surreptitiously, and with a forward-reaching movement turned down the wick of the lamp; black specks were falling on the table; happily the saucepan was covered, or the bouillon would have been ruined.

Chirac made a heart-rending spectacle, and Sophia was aware of deep and painful emotion in seeing him thus. He must have been utterly exhausted and broken by loss of sleep. He was a man incapable of regular hours, incapable of treating his body with decency. Though going to bed at three o'clock, he had continued to rise at his usual hour. He looked like one dead; but more sad, more wistful. Outside in the street a fog reigned, and his thin draggled beard was jewelled with the moisture of it. His attitude had the unconsidered and violent prostration of an overspent dog. The beaten animal in him was expressed in every detail of that posture. It showed even in his white, drawn eyelids, and in the falling of a finger. All his face was very sad. It appealed for mercy as the undefended face of sleep always appeals; it was so helpless, so exposed, so simple. It recalled Sophia to a sense of the inner mysteries of life, reminding her somehow that humanity walks ever on a thin crust over terrific abysses. She did not physically shudder; but her soul shuddered.

She mechanically placed the saucepan on the lamp, and the noise awakened Chirac. He groaned. At first he did not perceive her. When he saw that someone was looking down at him, he did not immediately realize who this one was. He rubbed his eyes with his fists, exactly like a baby, and sat up, and the chair cracked.

"What then?" he demanded. "Oh, madame, I ask pardon. What?"

"You have nearly destroyed the house," she said. "I smelt fire, and I came in. I was just in time. There is no danger now. But please be careful." She made as if to move towards the door.

"But what did I do?" he asked, his eyelids wavering.

She explained.

He rose from his chair unsteadily. She told him to sit down again, and he obeyed as though in a dream.

"I can go now," she said.

"Wait a moment," he murmured. "I ask pardon. I should not know how to thank you. You are truly too good. Will you wait one moment?"

His tone was one of supplication. He gazed at her, a little dazzled by the light and by her. The lamp and the candle illuminated the lower part of her face, theatrically, and showed the texture of her blue flannel peignoir; the pattern of a part of the lace collar was silhouetted in shadow on her cheek. Her face was flushed, and her hair hung down unconfined. Evidently he could not recover from his excusable astonishment at the apparition of such a figure in his room.

"What is it—now?" she said. The faint, quizzical emphasis which she put on the "now" indicated the

essential of her thought. The sight of him touched her and filled her with a womanly sympathy. But that sympathy was only the envelope of her disdain of him. She could not admire weakness. She could but pity it with a pity in which scorn was mingled. Her instinct was to treat him as a child. He had failed in human dignity. And it seemed to her as if she had not previously been quite certain whether she could not love him, but that now she was quite certain. She was close to him. She saw the wounds of a soul that could not hide its wounds, and she resented the sight. She was hard. She would not make allowances. And she revelled in her hardness. Contempt—a good-natured, kindly, forgiving contempt—that was the kernel of the sympathy which exteriorly warmed her! Contempt for the lack of self-control which had resulted in this swift degeneration of a man into a tortured victim! Contempt for the lack of perspective which magnified a mere mushroom passion till it filled the whole field of life! Contempt for this feminine slavery to sentiment! She felt that she might have been able to give herself to Chirac as one gives a toy to an infant. But of loving him . . . ! No! She was conscious of an immeasurable superiority to him, for she was conscious of the freedom of a strong mind.

"I wanted to tell you," said he, "I am going away."

"Where?" she asked.

"Out of Paris."

"Out of Paris? How?"

"By balloon! My journal . . . ! It is an affair of great importance. You understand. I offered myself. What would you?"

"It is dangerous," she observed, waiting to see if he would put on the silly air of one who does not understand fear.

"Oh!" the poor fellow muttered with a fatuous intonation and snapping of the fingers. "That is all the same to me. Yes, it is dangerous. Yes, it is dangerous!" he repeated. "But what would you . . . ? For me . . . !"

She wished that she had not mentioned danger. It hurt her to watch him incurring her ironic disdain.

"It will be the night after tomorrow," he said. "In the courtyard of the Gare du Nord. I want you to come and see me go. I particularly want you to come and see me go. I have asked Carlier to escort you."

He might have been saying, "I am offering myself to martyrdom, and you must assist at the spectacle."

She despised him yet more.

"Oh! Be tranquil," he said. "I shall not worry you. Never shall I speak to you again of my love. I know you. I know it would be useless. But I hope you will come and wish me bon voyage."

"Of course, if you really wish it," she replied with cheerful coolness.

He seized her hand and kissed it.

Once it had pleased her when he kissed her hand. But now she did not like it. It seemed hysterical and foolish to her. She felt her feet to be stone-cold on the floor.

"I'll leave you now," she said. "Please eat your soup."

She escaped, hoping he would not espy her feet.

II

The courtyard of the Nord Railway Station was lighted by oil-lamps taken from locomotives; their silvered reflectors threw dazzling rays from all sides on the under portion of the immense yellow mass of the balloon; the upper portion was swaying to and fro with gigantic ungainliness in the strong breeze. It was only a small balloon, as balloons are measured, but it seemed monstrous as it wavered over the human forms that were agitating themselves beneath it The cordage was silhouetted against the yellow taffetas as high up as the widest diameter of the balloon, but above that all was vague, and even spectators standing at a distance could not clearly separate the summit of the great sphere from the darkly moving sky. The car, held by ropes fastened to stakes, rose now and then a few inches uneasily from the ground. The sombre and severe architecture of the station buildings enclosed the balloon on every hand; it had only one way of escape. Over the roofs of that architecture, which shut out the sounds of the city, came the irregular booming of the bombardment. Shells were falling in the southern quarters of Paris, doing perhaps not a great deal of damage, but still plunging occasionally into the midst of some domestic interior and making a sad mess of it. The Parisians were convinced that the shells were aimed maliciously at hospitals and museums; and when a child happened to be blown to pieces their unspoken comments upon the Prussian savagery were bitter. Their faces said: "Those barbarians cannot even spare our children!" They amused themselves by creating a market in shells, paying more for a live shell than a dead one, and modifying the tariff according to the supply. And as the cattle-market was empty, and the vegetable market was empty, and beasts no longer pastured on the grass of the parks, and the twenty-five million rats of the metropolis were too numerous to furnish interest to spectators, and the Bourse was practically deserted, the traffic in shells sustained the starving mercantile instinct during a very dull period. But the effect on the nerves was deleterious. The nerves of everybody were like nothing but a raw wound. Violent anger would spring up magically out of laughter, and blows out of caresses. This indirect consequence of the bombardment was particularly noticeable in the group of men under the balloon. Each behaved as if he were controlling his temper in the most difficult circumstances. Constantly they all gazed upwards into the sky, though nothing could possibly be distinguished there save the

blurred edge of a flying cloud. But the booming came from that sky; the shells that were dropping on Montrouge came out of that sky; and the balloon was going up into it; the balloon was ascending into its mysteries, to brave its dangers, to sweep over the encircling ring of fire and savages.

Sophia stood apart with Carlier. Carlier had indicated a particular spot, under the shelter of the colonnade, where he said it was imperative that they should post themselves. Having guided Sophia to this spot, and impressed upon her that they were not to move, he seemed to consider that the activity of his *rôle* was finished, and spoke no word. With the very high silk hat which he always wore, and a thin old-fashioned overcoat whose collar was turned up, he made a rather grotesque figure. Fortunately the night was not very cold, or he might have passively frozen to death on the edge of that feverish group. Sophia soon ignored him. She watched the balloon. An aristocratic old man leaned against the car, watch in hand; at intervals he scowled, or stamped his foot. An old sailor, tranquilly smoking a pipe, walked round and round the balloon, staring at it; once he climbed up into the rigging, and once he jumped into the car and angrily threw out of it a bag, which someone had placed in it. But for the most part he was calm. Other persons of authority hurried about, talking and gesticulating; and a number of workmen waited idly for orders.

“Where is Chirac?” suddenly cried the old man with the watch.

Several voices deferentially answered, and a man ran away into the gloom on an errand.

Then Chirac appeared, nervous, self-conscious, restless. He was enveloped in a fur coat that Sophia had never seen before, and he carried dangling in his hand a cage containing six pigeons whose whiteness stirred uneasily within it. The sailor took the cage from him, and all the persons of authority gathered round to inspect the wonderful birds upon which, apparently, momentous affairs depended. When the group separated, the sailor was to be seen bending over the edge of the car to deposit the cage safely. He then got into the car, still smoking his pipe, and perched himself negligently on the wicker-work. The man with the watch was conversing with Chirac; Chirac nodded his head frequently in acquiescence, and seemed to be saying all the time: “Yes, sir! Perfectly, sir! I understand, sir! Yes, sir!”

Suddenly Chirac turned to the car and put a question to the sailor, who shook his head. Whereupon Chirac gave a gesture of submissive despair to the man with the watch. And in an instant the whole throng was in a ferment.

“The victuals!” cried the man with the watch. “The victuals, name of God! Must one be indeed an idiot to forget the victuals! Name of God—of God!”

Sophia smiled at the agitation, and at the inefficient management which had never thought of food. For it appeared that the food had not merely been forgotten; it was a question which had not ever been considered. She could not help despising all that crowd of self-important and fussy males to whom the idea had not occurred that even balloonists must eat. And she wondered whether everything was done like that. After a delay that seemed very long, the problem of victuals was solved, chiefly, as far as Sophia could judge, by means of cakes of chocolate and bottles of wine.

“It is enough! It is enough!” Chirac shouted passionately several times to a knot of men who began to argue with him.

Then he gazed round furtively, and with an inflation of the chest and a patting of his fur coat he came directly towards Sophia. Evi dently Sophia’s position had been prearranged between him and Carlier. They could forget food, but they could think of Sophia’s position!

All eyes followed him. Those eyes could not, in the gloom, distinguish Sophia’s beauty, but they could see that she was young and slim and elegant, and of foreign carriage. That was enough. The very air seemed to vibrate with the intense curiosity of those eyes. And immediately Chirac grew into the hero of some brilliant and romantic adventure. Immediately he was envied and admired by every man of authority present. What was she? Who was she? Was it a serious passion or simply a caprice? Had she flung herself at him? It was undeniable that lovely creatures did sometimes fling themselves at lucky mediocrities. Was she a married woman? An artiste? A girl? Such queries thumped beneath overcoats, while the correctness of a ceremonious demeanour was strictly observed.

Chirac uncovered, and kissed her hand. The wind disarranged his hair. She saw that his face was very pale and anxious beneath the swagger of a sincere desire to be brave.

“Well, it is the moment!” he said.

“Did you all forget the food?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. “what will you? One cannot think of everything.”

“I hope you will have a safe voyage,” she said.

She had already taken leave of him once, in the house, and heard all about the balloon and the sailor-aeronaut and the preparations; and now she had nothing to say, nothing whatever.

He shrugged his shoulders again. “I hope so!” he murmured, but in a tone to convey that he had no such hope.

“The wind isn’t too strong?” she suggested.

He shrugged his shoulders again. “What would you?”

“Is it in the direction you want?”

“Yes, nearly,” he admitted unwillingly. Then rousing himself: “Eh, well, madame. You have been extremely

amiable to come. I held to it very much—that you should come. It is because of you I quit Paris."

She resented the speech by a frown.

"Ah!" he implored in a whisper. "Do not do that. Smile on me. After all, it is not my fault. Remember that this may be the last time I see you, the last time I regard your eyes."

She smiled. She was convinced of the genuineness of the emotion which expressed itself in all this flamboyant behaviour. And she had to make excuses to herself on behalf of Chirac. She smiled to give him pleasure. The hard common sense in her might sneer, but indubitably she was the centre of a romantic episode. The balloon darkly swinging there! The men waiting! The secrecy of the mission! And Chirac, bare-headed in the wind that was to whisk him away, telling her in fatalistic accents that her image had devastated his life, while envious aspirants watched their colloquy! Yes, it was romantic. And she was beautiful! Her beauty was an active reality that went about the world playing tricks in spite of herself. The thoughts that passed through her mind were the large, splendid thoughts of romance. And it was Chirac who had aroused them! A real drama existed, then, triumphing over the accidental absurdities and pettinesses of the situation. Her final words to Chirac were tender and encouraging.

He hurried back to the balloon, resuming his cap. He was received with the respect due to one who comes fresh from conquest. He was sacred.

Sophia rejoined Carlier, who had withdrawn, and began to talk to him with a self-conscious garrulity. She spoke without reason and scarcely noticed what she was saying. Already Chirac was snatched out of her life, as other beings, so many of them, had been snatched. She thought of their first meetings, and of the sympathy which had always united them. He had lost his simplicity now, in the self-created crisis of his fate, and had sunk in her esteem. And she was determined to like him all the more because he had sunk in her esteem. She wondered whether he really had undertaken this adventure from sentimental disappointment. She wondered whether, if she had not forgotten to wind her watch one night, they would still have been living quietly under the same roof in the Rue Bréda.

The sailor climbed definitely into the car; he had covered himself with a large cloak. Chirac had got one leg over the side of the car, and eight men were standing by the rope, when a horse's hoofs clattered through the guarded entrance to the courtyard, amid an uproar of sudden excitement. The shiny chest of the horse was flecked with the classic foam.

"A telegram from the Governor of Paris!"

As the orderly, checking his mount, approached the group, even theold man with the watch raised his hat. The orderly responded, bent down to make an inquiry, which Chirac answered, and then, with another exchange of salutes, the official telegram was handed over to Chirac, and the horse backed away from the crowd. It was quite thrilling. Carlier was thrilled.

"He is never too prompt, the Governor. It is a quality!" said Carlier, with irony.

Chirac entered the car. And then the old man with the watch drew a black bag from the shadow behind him and entrusted it to Chirac, who accepted it with a profound deference and hid it. The sailor began to issue commands. The men at the ropes were bending down now. Suddenly the balloon rose about a foot and trembled. The sailor continued to shout. All the persons of authority gazed motionless at the balloon. The moment of suspense was eternal.

"Let go all!" cried the sailor, standing up, and clinging to the cordage. Chirac was seated in the car, a mass of dark fur with a small patch of white in it. The men at the ropes were a knot of struggling confused figures.

One side of the car tilted up, and the sailor was nearly pitched out. Three men at the other side had failed to free the ropes.

"Let go, corpses!" the sailor yelled at them.

The balloon jumped, as if it were drawn by some terrific impulse from the skies.

"Adieu!" called Chirac, pulling his cap off and waving it. "Adieu!"

"Bon voyage! Bon voyage!" the little crowd cheered. And then, "*Vive la France!*" Throats tightened, including Sophia's.

But the top of the balloon had leaned over, destroying its pear shape, and the whole mass swerved violently towards the wall of the station, the car swinging under it like a toy, and an anchor under the car. There was a cry of alarm. Then the great ball leaped again, and swept over the high glass roof, escaping by inches the spouting. The cheers expired instantly . . . The balloon was gone. It was spirited away as if by some furious and mighty power that had grown impatient in waiting for it. There remained for a few seconds on the collective retina of the spectators a vision of the inclined car swinging near the roof like the tail of a kite. And then nothing! Blackness! Blackness! Already the balloon was lost to sight in the vast stormy ocean of the night, a plaything of the winds. The spectators became once more aware of the dull booming of the cannonade. The balloon was already perhaps flying unseen amid the wrack over those guns.

Sophia involuntarily caught her breath. A chill sense of loneliness, of purposelessness, numbed her being.

Nobody ever saw Chirac or the old sailor again. The sea must have swallowed them. Of the sixty-five balloons that left Paris during the siege, two were not heard of. This was the first of the two. Chirac had, at any rate, not magnified the peril, though his intention was undoubtedly to magnify it.

This was the end of Sophia's romantic adventures in France. Soon afterwards the Germans entered Paris, by mutual agreement, and made a point of seeing the Louvre, and departed, amid the silence of a city. For Sophia the conclusion of the siege meant chiefly that prices went down. Long before supplies from outside could reach Paris, the shop-windows were suddenly full of goods which had arrived from the shopkeepers alone knew where. Sophia, with the stock in her cellar, could have held out for several weeks more, and it annoyed her that she had not sold more of her good things while good things were worth gold. The signing of a treaty at Versailles reduced the value of Sophia's two remaining hams from about five pounds apiece to the usual price of hams. However, at the end of January she found herself in possession of a capital of about eight thousand francs, all the furniture of the flat, and a reputation. She had earned it all. Nothing could destroy the structure of her beauty, but she looked worn and appreciably older. She wondered often when Chirac would return. She might have written to Carlier or to the paper; but she did not. It was Niepce who discovered in a newspaper that Chirac's balloon had miscarried. At the moment the news did not affect her at all; but after several days she began to feel her loss in a dull sort of way; and she felt it more and more, though never acutely. She was perfectly convinced that Chirac could never have attracted her powerfully. She continued to dream, at rare intervals, of the kind of passion that would have satisfied her, glowing but banked down like a fire in some fine chamber of a rich but careful household.

She was speculating upon what her future would be, and whether by inertia she was doomed to stay for ever in the Rue Bréda, when the Commune caught her. She was more vexed than frightened by the Commune; vexed that a city so in need of repose and industry should indulge in such antics. For many people the Commune was a worse experience than the siege; but not for Sophia. She was a woman and a foreigner. Niepce was infinitely more disturbed than Sophia; he went in fear of his life. Sophia would go out to market and take her chance. It is true that during one period the whole population of the house went to live in the cellars, and orders to the butcher and other tradesmen were given over the party-wall into the adjoining courtyard, which communicated with an alley. A strange existence, and possibly perilous! But the women who passed through it, and had also passed through the siege, were not very much intimidated by it, unless they happened to have husbands or lovers who were active politicians.

Sophia did not cease, during the greater part of the year 1871, to make a living and to save money. She watched every sou, and she developed a tendency to demand from her tenants all that they could pay. She excused this to herself by ostentatiously declaring every detail of her prices in advance. It came to the same thing in the end, with this advantage, that the bills did not lead to unpleasantness. Her difficulties commenced when Paris at last definitely resumed its normal aspect and life, when all the women and children came back to those city termini which they had left in such huddled, hysterical throngs, when flats were re-opened that had long been shut, and men who for a whole year had had the disadvantages and the advantages of being without wife and family, anchored themselves once more to the hearth. Then it was that Sophia failed to keep all her rooms let. She could have let them easily and constantly and at high rents; but not to men without encumbrances. Nearly every day she refused attractive tenants in pretty hats, or agreeable gentlemen who only wanted a room on condition that they might offer hospitality to a dashing petticoat. It was useless to proclaim aloud that her house was "serious." The ambition of the majority of these joyous persons was to live in a "serious" house, because each was sure that at bottom he or she was a "serious" person, and quite different from the rest of the joyous world. The character of Sophia's flat, instead of repelling the wrong kind of aspirant, infallibly drew just that kind. Hope was inextinguishable in these bosoms. They heard that there would be no chance for them at Sophia's; but they tried nevertheless. And occasionally Sophia would make a mistake, and grave unpleasantness would occur before the mistake could be rectified. The fact was that the street was too much for her. Few people would credit that there was a serious boarding-house in the Rue Bréda. The police themselves would not credit it. And Sophia's beauty was against her. At that time the Rue Bréda was perhaps the most notorious street in the centre of Paris; at the height of its reputation as a warren of individual improprieties; most busily creating that prejudice against itself which, over thirty years later, forced the authorities to change its name in obedience to the wish of its tradesmen. When Sophia went out at about eleven o'clock in the morning with her reticule to buy, the street was littered with women who had gone out with reticules to buy. But whereas Sophia was fully dressed, and wore headgear, the others were in dressing-gown and slippers, or opera-cloak and slippers, having slid directly out of unspeakable beds and omitted to brush their hair out of their puffy eyes. In the little shops of the Rue Bréda, the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, and the Rue des Martyrs, you were very close indeed to the primitive instincts of human nature. It was wonderful; it was amusing; it was excitingly picturesque; and the universality of the manners rendered moral indignation absurd. But the neighbourhood was certainly not one in which a woman of Sophia's race, training, and character could comfortably earn a living, or even exist. She could not fight against the entire street. She, and not the street, was out of place and in the wrong. Little wonder that the neighbours lifted their shoulders when they spoke of her! What beautiful woman but a mad Englishwoman would have had the idea of establishing herself in the Rue Bréda with the intention of living like a nun and compelling others to do the same?

By dint of continual ingenuity, Sophia contrived to win somewhat more than her expenses, but she was slowly driven to admit to herself that the situation could not last.

Then one day she saw in *Galignani's Messenger* an advertisement of an English Pension for sale in the Rue Lord Byron, in the Champs Elysées quarter. It belonged to some people named Frensham, and had enjoyed a certain popularity before the war. The proprietor and his wife, however, had not sufficiently allowed for the vicissitudes of politics in Paris. Instead of saving money during their popularity, they had put it on the back and on the fingers of Mrs Frensham. The siege and the Commune had almost ruined them. With capital they might have restored themselves to their former pride; but their capital was exhausted. Sophia answered the advertisement. She impressed the Frenshams, who were delighted with the prospect of dealing in business with an honest English face. Like many English people abroad, they were most strangely obsessed by the notion that they had quitted an island of honest men to live among thieves and robbers. They always implied that dishonesty was unknown in Britain. They offered, if she would take over the lease, to sell all their furniture and their renown for ten thousand francs. She declined, the price seeming absurd to her. When they asked her to name a price, she said that she preferred not to do so. Upon entreaty, she said four thousand francs. They then allowed her to see that they considered her to have been quite right in hesitating to name a price so ridiculous. And their confidence in the honest English face seemed to have been shocked. Sophia left. When she got back to the Rue Bréda she was relieved that the matter had come to nothing. She did not precisely foresee what her future was to be, but at any rate she knew she shrank from the responsibility of the Pension Frensham. The next morning she received a letter offering to accept six thousand. She wrote and declined. She was indifferent, and she would not budge from four thousand. The Frenshams gave way. They were pained, but they gave way. The glitter of four thousand francs in cash, and freedom, was too tempting.

Thus Sophia became the proprietress of the Pension Frensham in the cold and correct Rue Lord Byron. She made room in it for nearly all her other furniture, so that instead of being under-furnished, as pensions usually are, it was over-furnished. She was extremely timid at first, for the rent alone was four thousand francs a year; and the prices of the quarter were alarmingly different from those of the Rue Bréda. She lost a lot of sleep. For some nights, after she had been installed in the Rue Lord Byron about a fortnight, she scarcely slept at all, and she ate no more than she slept. She cut down expenditure to the very lowest, and frequently walked over to the Rue Bréda to do her marketing. With the aid of a charwoman at six sous an hour she accomplished everything. And though clients were few, the feat was in the nature of a miracle; for Sophia had to cook.

The articles which George Augustus Sala wrote under the title "Paris herself again" ought to have been paid for in gold by the hotel and pension-keepers of Paris. They awakened the English curiosity and the desire to witness the scene of terrible events. Their effect was immediately noticeable. In less than a year after her adventurous purchase, Sophia had acquired confidence, and she was employing two servants, working them very hard at low wages. She had also acquired the landlady's manner. She was known as Mrs Frensham. Across the balconies of two windows the Frenshams had left a gilded sign, "Pension Frensham," and Sophia had not removed it. She often explained that her name was not Frensham; but in vain. Every visitor inevitably and persistently addressed her according to the sign. It was past the general comprehension that the proprietress of the Pension Frensham might bear another name than Frensham. But later there came into being a class of persons, habitués of the Pension Frensham, who knew the real name of the proprietress and were proud of knowing it, and by this knowledge were distinguished from the herd. What struck Sophia was the astounding similarity of her guests. They all asked the same questions, made the same exclamations, went out on the same excursions, returned with the same judgements, and exhibited the same unimpaired assurance that foreigners were really very peculiar people. They never seemed to advance in knowledge. There was a constant stream of explorers from England who had to be set on their way to the Louvre or the Bon Marché.

Sophia's sole interest was in her profits. The excellence of her house was firmly established. She kept it up, and she kept the modest prices up. Often she had to refuse guests. She naturally did so with a certain distant condescension. Her manner to guests increased in stiff formality; and she was excessively firm with undesirables. She grew to be seriously convinced that no Pension as good as hers existed in the world, or ever had existed, or ever could exist. Hers was the acme of niceness and respectability. Her preference for the respectable rose to a passion. And there were no faults in her establishment. Even the once despised showy furniture of Madame Foucault had mysteriously changed into the best conceivable furniture; and its cracks were hallowed.

She never heard a word of Gerald or of her family. In the thousands of people who stayed under her perfect roof, not one mentioned Bursley or disclosed a knowledge of anybody that Sophia had known. Several men had the wit to propose marriage to her with more or less skilfulness, but none of them was skilful enough to perturb her heart. She had forgotten the face of love. She was a landlady. She was *the* landlady: efficient, stylish, diplomatic, and tremendously experienced. There was no trickery, no baseness of Parisian life that she was not acquainted with and armed against. She could not be startled and she could not be swindled.

Years passed, until there was a vista of years behind her. Sometimes she would think, in an unoccupied moment, "How strange it is that I should be here, doing what I am doing!" But the regular ordinariness of her

existence would instantly seize her again. At the end of 1878, the Exhibition Year, her Pension consisted of two floors instead of one, and she had turned the two hundred pounds stolen from Gerald into over two thousand.

BOOK FOUR

WHAT LIFE IS

CHAPTER I

FRENSHAM'S

I

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton sat in the long dining-room of the Pension Frensham, Rue Lord Byron, Paris; and he looked out of place there. It was an apartment about thirty feet in length, and of the width of two windows, which sufficiently lighted one half of a very long table with round ends. The gloom of the other extremity was illumined by a large mirror in a tarnished gilt frame, which filled a good portion of the wall opposite the windows. Near the mirror was a high folding-screen of four leaves, and behind this screen could be heard the sound of a door continually shutting and opening. In the long wall to the left of the windows were two doors, one dark and important, a door of state, through which a procession of hungry and a procession of sated solemn self-conscious persons passed twice daily, and the other, a smaller door, glazed, its glass painted with wreaths of roses, not an original door of the house, but a late breach in the wall, that seemed to lead to the dangerous and to the naughty. The wallpaper and the window drapery were rich and forbidding, dark in hue, mysterious of pattern. Over the state-door was a pair of antlers. And at intervals, so high up as to defy inspection, engravings and oil-paintings made oblong patches on the walls. They were hung from immense nails with porcelain heads, and they appeared to depict the more majestic aspect of man and nature. One engraving, over the mantelpiece and nearer earth than the rest, unmistakably showed Louis Philippe and his family in attitudes of virtue. Beneath this royal group, a vast gilt clock, flanked by pendants of the same period, gave the right time—a quarter past seven.

And down the room, filling it, ran the great white table, bordered with bowed heads and the backs of chairs. There were over thirty people at the table, and the peculiarly restrained noisiness of their knives and forks on the plates proved that they were a discreet and a correct people. Their clothes—blouses, bodices, and jackets—did not flatter the lust of the eye. Only two or three were in evening dress. They spoke little, and generally in a timorous tone, as though silence had been enjoined. Somebody would half-whisper a remark, and then his neighbour, absently fingering her bread and lifting gaze from her plate into vacancy, would conscientiously weigh the remark and half-whisper in reply: "I dare say." But a few spoke loudly and volubly, and were regarded by the rest, who envied them, as underbred.

Food was quite properly the chief preoccupation. The diners ate as those eat who are paying a fixed price per day for as much as they can consume while observing the rules of the game. Without moving their heads they glanced out of the corners of their eyes, watching the manoeuvres of the three starched maids who served. They had no conception of food save as portions laid out in rows on large silver dishes, and when a maid bent over them deferentially, balancing the dish, they summed up the offering in an instant, and in an instant decided how much they could decently take, and to what extent they could practise the theoretic liberty of choice. And if the food for any reason did not tempt them, or if it egregiously failed to coincide with their aspirations, they considered themselves aggrieved. For, according to the game, they might not command; they had the right to seize all that was presented under their noses, like genteel tigers; and they had the right to refuse; that was all. The dinner was thus a series of emotional crises for the diners, who knew only that full dishes and clean plates came endlessly from the banging door behind the screen, and that ravaged dishes and dirty plates vanished endlessly through the same door. They were all eating similar food simultaneously; they began together and they finished together. The flies that haunted the paper-bunches which hung from the chandeliers to the level of the flower, vases, were more free. The sole event that chequered the exact regularity of the repast was the occasional arrival of a wine-bottle for one of the guests.

The receiver of the wine-bottle signed a small paper in exchange for it and wrote largely a number on the label of the bottle; then, staring at the number and fearing that after all it might be misread by a stupid maid or an unscrupulous compeer, he would re-write the number on another part of the label, even more largely.

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton obviously did not belong to this world. He was a young man of twenty-five or so, not handsome, but elegant. Though he was not in evening dress, though he was, as a fact, in a very light grey suit, entirely improper to a dinner, he was elegant. The suit was admirably cut, and nearly new; but he wore it as though he had never worn anything else. Also his demeanour, reserved yet free from self-consciousness, his method of handling a knife and fork, the niceties of his manner in transferring food from the silver dishes to his plate, the tone in which he ordered half a bottle of wine—all these details infallibly indicated to the company that Matthew Peel-Swynnerton was their superior. Some folks hoped that he was the son of a lord, or even a lord. He happened to be fixed at the end of the table, with his back to the window, and there was a vacant chair on either side of him; this situation favoured the hope of his high rank. In truth, he was the son, the grandson, and several times the nephew, of earthenware manufacturers. He noticed that the large "compote" (as it was called in his trade) which marked the centre of the table, was the production of his firm. This surprised him, for Peel, Swynnerton and Co., known and revered throughout the Five Towns as "Peels," did not cater for cheap markets.

A late guest startled the room, a fat, flabby, middle-aged man whose nose would have roused the provisional hostility of those who have convinced themselves that Jews are not as other men. His nose did not definitely brand him as a usurer and a murderer of Christ, but it was suspicious. His clothes hung loose, and might have been anybody's clothes. He advanced with brisk assurance to the table, bowed, somewhat too effusively, to several people, and sat down next to Peel-Swynnerton. One of the maids at once brought him a plate of soup, and he said: "Thank you, Marie," smiling at her. He was evidently a habitué of the house. His spectacled eyes beamed the superiority which comes of knowing girls by their names. He was seriously handicapped in the race for sustenance, being two and a half courses behind, but he drew level with speed and then, having accomplished this, he sighed, and pointedly engaged Peel-Swynnerton with his sociable glance.

"Ah!" he breathed out. "Nuisance when you come in late, sir!"

Peel-Swynnerton gave a reluctant affirmative.

"Doesn't only upset you! It upsets the house. Servants don't like it!"

"No," murmured Peel-Swynnerton, "I suppose not."

"However, it's not often *I*'m late," said the man. "Can't help it sometimes. Business! Worst of these French business people is that they've no notion of time. Appointments . . . ! God bless my soul!"

"Do you come here often?" asked Peel-Swynnerton. He detested the fellow, quite inexcusably, perhaps because his serviette was tucked under his chin; but he saw that the fellow was one of your determined talkers, who always win in the end. Moreover, as being clearly not an ordinary tourist in Paris, the fellow mildly excited his curiosity.

"I live here," said the other. "Very convenient for a bachelor, you know. Have done for years. My office is just close by. You may know my name—Lewis Mardon."

Peel-Swynnerton hesitated. The hesitation convicted him of not "knowing his Paris" well.

"House-agent," said Lewis Mardon, quickly.

"Oh yes," said Peel-Swynnerton, vaguely recalling a vision of the name among the advertisements on newspaper kiosks.

"I expect," Mr Mardon went on, "my name is as well known as anybody's in Paris."

"I suppose so," assented Peel-Swynnerton.

The conversation fell for a few moments.

"Staying here long?" Mr Mardon demanded, having added up Peel-Swynnerton as a man of style and of means, and being puzzled by his presence at that table.

"I don't know," said Peel-Swynnerton.

This was a lie, justified in the utterer's opinion as a repulse to Mr Mardon's vulgar inquisitiveness, such inquisitiveness as might have been expected from a fellow who tucked his serviette under his chin. Peel-Swynnerton knew exactly how long he would stay. He would stay until the day after the morrow; he had only about fifty francs in his pocket. He had been making a fool of himself in another quarter of Paris, and he had descended to the Pension Frensham as a place where he could be absolutely sure of spending not more than twelve francs a day. Its reputation was high, and it was convenient for the Galliéra Museum, where he was making some drawings which he had come to Paris expressly to make, and without which he could not reputably return to England. He was capable of foolishness, but he was also capable of wisdom, and scarcely any pressure of need would have induced him to write home for money to replace the money spent on making himself into a fool.

Mr Mardon was conscious of a check. But, being of an accommodating disposition, he at once tried another direction.

"Good food here, eh?" he suggested.

"Very," said Peel-Swynnerton, with sincerity. "I was quite—"

At that moment, a tall straight woman of uncertain age pushed open the principal door and stood for an instant in the doorway. Peel-Swynnerton had just time to notice that she was handsome and pale, and that her hair was black, and then she was gone again, followed by a clipped poodle that accompanied her. She had signed with a brief gesture to one of the servants, who at once set about lighting the gas-jets over the table.

"Who is that?" asked Peel-Swynnerton, without reflecting that it was now he who was making advances to the fellow whose napkin covered all his shirt-front.

"That's the missis, that is," said Mr Mardon, in a lower and semi-confidential voice.

"Oh! Mrs Frensham?"

"Yes. But her real name is Scales," said Mr Mardon, proudly.

"Widow, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And she runs the whole show?"

"She runs the entire contraption," said Mr Mardon, solemnly; "and don't you make any mistake!" He was getting familiar.

Peel-Swynnerton beat him off once more, glancing with careful, uninterested nonchalance at the gas-burners which exploded one after another with a little plop under the application of the maid's taper. The white table gleamed more whitely than ever under the flaring gas. People at the end of the room away from the window instinctively smiled, as though the sun had begun to shine. The aspect of the dinner was changed, ameliorated; and with the reiterated statement that the evenings were drawing in though it was only July, conversation became almost general. In two minutes Mr Mardon was genially talking across the whole length of the table. The meal finished in a state that resembled conviviality.

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton might not go out into the crepuscular delights of Paris. Unless he remained within the shelter of the Pension, he could not hope to complete successfully his reconversion from folly to wisdom. So he bravely passed through the small rose-embroidered door into a small glass-covered courtyard, furnished with palms, wicker armchairs, and two small tables; and he lighted a pipe and pulled out of his pocket a copy of *The Referee*. That retreat was called the Lounge; it was the only part of the Pension where smoking was not either a positive crime or a transgression against good form. He felt lonely. He said to himself grimly in one breath that pleasure was all rot, and in the next he sullenly demanded of the universe how it was that pleasure could not go on for ever, and why he was not Mr Barney Barnato. Two old men entered the retreat and burnt cigarettes with many precautions. Then Mr Lewis Mardon appeared and sat down boldly next to Matthew, like a privileged friend. After all, Mr Mardon was better than nobody whatever, and Matthew decided to suffer him, especially as he began without preliminary skirmishing to talk about life in Paris. An irresistible subject! Mr Mardon said in a worldly tone that the existence of a bachelor in Paris might easily be made agreeable. But that, of course, for himself—well, he preferred, as a general rule, the Pension Frensham sort of thing; and it was excellent for his business. Still he could not . . . he knew . . . He compared the advantages of what he called "knocking about" in Paris, with the equivalent in London. His information about London was out of date, and Peel-Swynnerton was able to set him right on important details. But his information about Paris was infinitely precious and interesting to the younger man, who saw that he had hitherto lived under strange misconceptions.

"Have a whisky?" asked Mr Mardon, suddenly. "Very good here!" he added.

"Thanks!" drawled Peel-Swynnerton.

The temptation to listen to Mr Mardon as long as Mr Mardon would talk was not to be overcome. And presently, when the old men had departed, they were frankly telling each other stories in the dimness of the retreat. Then, when the supply of stories came to an end, Mr Mardon smacked his lips over the last drop of whisky and ejaculated: "Yes!" as if giving a general confirmation to all that had been said.

"Do have one with me," said Matthew, politely. It was the least he could do.

The second supply of whiskies was brought into the Lounge by Mr Mardon's Marie. He smiled on her familiarly, and remarked that he supposed she would soon be going to bed after a hard day's work. She gave a *moue* and a flounce in reply, and swished out.

"Carries herself well, doesn't she?" observed Mr Mardon, as though Marie had been an exhibit at an agricultural show. "Ten years ago she was very fresh and pretty, but of course it takes it out of 'em, a place like this!"

"But still," said Peel-Swynnerton, "they must like it or they wouldn't stay—that is, unless things are very different here from what they are in England."

The conversation seemed to have stimulated him to examine the woman question in all its bearings, with philosophic curiosity.

"Oh! They *like* it," Mr Mardon assured him, as one who knew. "Besides, Mrs Scales treats 'em very well. I know *that*. She's told me. She's very particular"—he looked around to see if walls had ears—"and, by Jove, you've got to be; but she treats 'em well. You'd scarcely believe the wages they get, and pickings. Now at the Hotel Moscow—know the Hotel Moscow?"

Happily Peel-Swynnerton did. He had been advised to avoid it because it catered exclusively for English visitors, but in the Pension Frensham he had accepted something even more exclusively British than the Hotel

Moscow. Mr Mardon was quite relieved at his affirmative.

"The Hotel Moscow is a limited company now," said he; "English."

"Really?"

"Yes. I floated it. It was my idea. A great success! That's how I know all about the Hotel Moscow." He looked at the walls again. "I wanted to do the same here," he murmured, and Peel-Swynnerton had to show that he appreciated this confidence. "But she never would agree. I've tried her all ways. No go! It's a thousand pities."

"Paying thing, eh?"

"This place? I should say it was! And I ought to be able to judge, I reckon. Mrs Scales is one of the shrewdest women you'd meet in a day's march. She's made a lot of money here, a lot of money. And there's no reason why a place like this shouldn't be five times as big as it is. Ten times. The scope's unlimited, my dear sir. All that's wanted is capital. Naturally she has capital of her own, and she could get more. But then, as she says, she doesn't want the place any bigger. She says it's now just as big as she can handle. That isn't so. She's a woman who could handle anything—a born manager—but even if it was so, all she would have to do would be to retire—only leave us the place and the name. It's the name that counts. And she's made the name of Frensham worth something, I can tell you!"

"Did she get the place from her husband?" asked Peel-Swynnerton. Her own name of Scales intrigued him.

Mr Mardon shook his head. "Bought it on her own, after the husband's time, for a song—a song! I know, because I knew the original Frenshams."

"You must have been in Paris a long time," said Peel-Swynnerton.

Mr Mardon could never resist an opportunity to talk about himself. His was a wonderful history. And Peel-Swynnerton, while scorning the man for his fatuity, was impressed. And when that was finished—

"Yes!" said Mr Mardon after a pause, reaffirming everything in general by a single monosyllable.

Shortly afterwards he rose, saying that his habits were regular.

"Good night," he said with a mechanical smile.

"G-good night," said Peel-Swynnerton, trying to force the tone of fellowship and not succeeding. Their intimacy which had sprung up like a mushroom, suddenly fell into dust. Peel-Swynnerton's unspoken comment to Mr Mardon's back was: "Ass!" Still, the sum of Peel-Swynnerton's knowledge had indubitably been increased during the evening. And the hour was yet early. Half past ten! The Folies-Marigny, with its beautiful architecture and its crowds of white toilettes, and its frothing of champagne and of beer, and its musicians in tight red coats, was just beginning to be alive—and at a distance of scarcely a stone's-throw! Peel-Swynnerton pictured the terraced, glittering hall, which had been the prime origin of his exceeding foolishness. And he pictured all the other resorts, great and small, garlanded with white lanterns, in the Champs Elysées; and the sombre aisles of the Champs Elysées where mysterious pale figures walked troublingly under the shade of trees, while snatches of wild song or absurd brassy music floated up from the resorts and restaurants. He wanted to go out and spend those fifty francs that remained in his pocket. After all, why not telegraph to England for more money? "Oh, damn it!" he said savagely, and stretched his arms and got up. The Lounge was very small, gloomy and dreary.

One brilliant incandescent light burned in the hall, crudely illuminating the wicker fauteuils, a corded trunk with a blue-and-red label on it, a Fitzroy barometer, a map of Paris, a coloured poster of the Compagnie Transatlantique, and the mahogany retreat of the hall-portress. In that retreat was not only the hall-portress—an aged woman with a white cap above her wrinkled pink face—but the mistress of the establishment. They were murmuring together softly; they seemed to be well disposed to one another. The portress was respectful, but the mistress was respectful also. The hall, with its one light tranquilly burning, was bathed in an honest calm, the calm of a day's work accomplished, of gradual relaxation from tension, of growing expectation of repose. In its simplicity it affected Peel-Swynnerton as a medicine tonic for nerves might have affected him. In that hall, though exterior nocturnal life was but just stirring into activity, it seemed that the middle of the night had come, and that these two women alone watched in a mansion full of sleepers. And all the recitals which Peel-Swynnerton and Mr Mardon had exchanged sank to the level of pitiably foolish gossip. Peel-Swynnerton felt that his duty to the house was to retire to bed. He felt, too, that he could not leave the house without saying that he was going out, and that he lacked the courage deliberately to tell these two women he was going out—at that time of night! He dropped into one of the chairs and made a second attempt to peruse *The Referee*. Useless! Either his mind was outside in the Champs Elysées, or his gaze would wander surreptitiously to the figure of Mrs Scales. He could not well distinguish her face because it was in the shadow of the mahogany.

Then the portress came forth from her box, and, slightly bent, sped actively across the hall, smiling pleasantly at the guest as she passed him, and disappeared up the stairs. The mistress was alone in the retreat. Peel-Swynnerton jumped up brusquely, dropping the paper with a rustle, and approached her.

"Excuse me," he said deferentially. "Have any letters come for me tonight?"

He knew that the arrival of letters for him was impossible, since nobody knew his address.

"What name?" The question was coldly polite, and the questioner looked him full in the face. Undoubtedly she was a handsome woman. Her hair was greying at the temples, and the skin was withered and crossed with

lines. But she was handsome. She was one of those women of whom to their last on earth the stranger will say: “When she was young she must have been worth looking at!”—with a little transient regret that beautiful young women cannot remain for ever young. Her voice was firm and even, sweet in tone, and yet morally harsh from incessant traffic with all varieties of human nature. Her eyes were the impartial eyes of one who is always judging. And evidently she was a proud, even a haughty creature, with her careful, controlled politeness. Evidently she considered herself superior to no matter what guest. Her eyes announced that she had lived and learnt, that she knew more about life than anyone whom she was likely to meet, and that having pre-eminently succeeded in life, she had tremendous confidence in herself. The proof of her success was the unique Frensham’s. A consciousness of the uniqueness of Frensham’s was also in those eyes. Theoretically Matthew Peel-Swynnerton’s mental attitude towards lodging-house keepers was condescending, but here it was not condescending. It had the real respectfulness of a man who for the moment at any rate is impressed beyond his calculations. His glance fell as he said—

“Peel-Swynnerton.” Then he looked up again.

He said the words awkwardly, and rather fearfully, as if aware that he was playing with fire. If this Mrs Scales was the long-vanished aunt of his friend, Cyril Povey, she must know those two names, locally so famous. Did she start? Did she show a sign of being perturbed? At first he thought he detected a symptom of emotion, but in an instant he was sure that he had detected nothing of the sort, and that it was silly to suppose that he was treading on the edge of a romance. Then she turned towards the letter-rack at her side, and he saw her face in profile. It bore a sudden and astonishing likeness to the profile of Cyril Povey; a resemblance unmistakable and finally decisive. The nose and the curve of the upper lip were absolutely Cyril’s. Matthew Peel-Swynnerton felt very queer. He felt like a criminal in peril of being caught in the act, and he could not understand why he should feel so. The landlady looked in the “P” pigeon-hole, and in the “S” pigeon-hole.

“No,” she said quietly, “I see nothing for you.”

Taken with a swift rash audacity, he said: “Have you had anyone named Povey here recently?”

“Povey?”

“Yes. Cyril Povey, of Bursley—in the Five Towns.”

He was very impressionable, very sensitive, was Matthew Peel-Swynnerton. His voice trembled as he spoke. But hers also trembled in reply.

“Not that I remember! No! Were you expecting him to be here?”

“Well, it wasn’t at all sure,” he muttered. “Thank you. Good night.”

“Good night,” she said, apparently with the simple perfunctoriness of the landlady who says good night to dozens of strangers every evening.

He hurried away upstairs, and met the portress coming down. “Well, well!” he thought. “Of all the queer things—!” And he kept nodding his head. At last he had encountered something *really* strange in the spectacle of existence. It had fallen to him to discover the legendary woman who had fled from Bursley before he was born, and of whom nobody knew anything. What news for Cyril! What a staggering episode! He had scarcely any sleep that night. He wondered whether he would be able to meet Mrs Scales without self-consciousness on the morrow. However, he was spared the curious ordeal of meeting her. She did not appear at all on the following day; nor did he see her before he left. He could not find a pretext for asking why she was invisible.

II

The hansom of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton drew up in front of No. 26, Victoria Grove, Chelsea; his kit-bag was on the roof of the cab. The cabman had a red flower in his buttonhole. Matthew leaped out of the vehicle, holding his straw hat on his head with one hand. On reaching the pavement he checked himself suddenly and became carelessly calm. Another straw-hatted and grey-clad figure was standing at the side-gate of No. 26 in the act of lighting a cigarette.

“Hello, Matt!” exclaimed the second figure, languidly, and in a veiled voice due to the fact that he was still holding the match to the cigarette and puffing. “What’s the meaning of all this fluster? You’re just the man I want to see.”

He threw away the match with a wave of the arm, and took Matthew’s hand for a moment, blowing a double shaft of smoke through his nose.

“I want to see you, too,” said Matthew. “And I’ve only got a minute. I’m on my way to Euston. I must catch the twelve-five.”

He looked at his friend, and could positively see no feature of it that was not a feature of Mrs Scales’s face. Also, the elderly woman held her body in exactly the same way as the young man. It was entirely disconcerting.

“Have a cigarette,” answered Cyril Povey, imperturbably. He was two years younger than Matthew, from whom he had acquired most of his vast and intricate knowledge of life and art, with certain leading notions of deportment; whose pupil indeed he was in all the things that matter to young men. But he had already surpassed his professor. He could pretend to be old much more successfully than Matthew could.

The cabman approvingly watched the ignition of the second cigarette, and then the cabman pulled out a cigar, and showed his large, white teeth, as he bit the end off it The appearance and manner of his fare, the quality of the kit-bag, and the opening gestures of the interview between the two young dukes, had put the cabman in an optimistic mood. He had no apprehensions of miserly and ungentlemanly conduct by his fare upon the arrival at Euston. He knew the language of the tilt of a straw hat. And it was a magnificent day in London. The group of the two elegances dominated by the perfection of the cabman made a striking tableau of triumphant masculinity, content with itself, and needing nothing.

Matthew lightly took Cyril's arm and drew him farther down the street, past the gate leading to the studio (hidden behind a house) which Cyril rented.

"Look here, my boy," he began, "I've found your aunt."

"Well, that's very nice of you," said Cyril, solemnly. "That's a friendly act. May I ask what aunt?"

"Mrs Scales," said Matthew. "You know—"

"Not the—" Cyril's face changed.

"Yes, precisely!" said Matthew, feeling that he was not being cheated of the legitimate joy caused by making a sensation. Assuredly he had made a sensation in Victoria Grove.

When he had related the whole story, Cyril said: "Then she doesn't know you know?"

"I don't think so. No, I'm sure she doesn't. She may guess."

"But how can you be certain you haven't made a mistake? It may be that—"

"Look here, my boy," Matthew interrupted him. "I've not made any mistake."

"But you've no proof."

"Proof be damned!" said Matthew, nettled. "I tell you it's *her*!"

"Oh! All right! All right! What puzzles me most is what the devil you were doing in a place like that. According to your description of it, it must be a—"

"I went there because I was broke," said Matthew.

"Razzle?"

Matthew nodded.

"Pretty stiff, that!" commented Cyril, when Matthew had narrated the prologue to Frensham's.

"Well, she absolutely swore she never took less than two hundred francs. And she looked it, too! And she was worth it! I had the time of my life with that woman. I can tell you one thing—no more English for me! They simply aren't in it."

"How old was she?"

Matthew reflected judicially. "I should say she was thirty." The gaze of admiration and envy was upon him. He had the legitimate joy of making a second sensation. "I'll let you know more about that when I come back," he added. "I can open your eyes, my child."

Cyril smiled sheepishly. "Why can't you stay now?" he asked. "I'm going to take the cast of that Verrall girl's arm this afternoon, and I know I can't do it alone. And Robson's no good. You're just the man I want."

"Can't!" said Matthew.

"Well, come into the studio a minute, anyhow."

"Haven't time; I shall miss my train."

"I don't care if you miss forty trains. You must come in. You've got to see that fountain," Cyril insisted crossly.

Matthew yielded. When they emerged into the street again, after six minutes of Cyril's savage interest in his own work, Matthew remembered Mrs Scales.

"Of course you'll write to your mother?" he said.

"Yes," said Cyril, "I'll write; but if you happen to see her, you might tell her."

"I will," said Matthew. "Shall you go over to Paris?"

"What! To see Auntie?" He smiled. "I don't know. Depends. If the mater will fork out all my exes . . . it's an idea," he said lightly, and then without any change of tone, "Naturally, if you're going to idle about here all morning you aren't likely to catch the twelve-five."

Matthew got into the cab, while the driver, the stump of a cigar between his exposed teeth, leaned forward and lifted the reins away from the tilted straw hat.

"By-the-by, lend me some silver," Matthew demanded. "It's a good thing I've got my return ticket. I've run it as fine as ever I did in my life."

Cyril produced eight shillings in silver. Secure in the possession of these riches, Matthew called to the driver —

"Euston—like hell!"

"Yes, sir," said the driver calmly.

"Not coming my way, I suppose?" Matthew shouted as an afterthought, just when the cab began to move.

"No. Barber's," Cyril shouted in answer, and waved his hand.

The horse rattled into Fulham Road.

Three days later Matthew Peel-Swynnerton was walking along Bursley Market Place when, just opposite the Town Hall, he met a short, fat, middle-aged lady dressed in black, with a black embroidered mantle, and a small bonnet tied with black ribbon and ornamented with jet fruit and crape leaves. As she stepped slowly and carefully forward she had the dignified, important look of a provincial woman who has always been accustomed to deference in her native town, and whose income is ample enough to extort obsequiousness from the vulgar of all ranks. But immediately she caught sight of Matthew her face changed. She became simple and naïve. She blushed slightly, smiling with a timid pleasure. For her, Matthew belonged to a superior race. He bore the almost sacred name of Peel. His family had been distinguished in the district for generations. "Peel!" You could without impropriety utter it in the same breath with "Wedgwood." And "Swynnerton" stood not much lower. Neither her self-respect, which was great, nor her common sense, which far exceeded the average, could enable her to extend as far as the Peels the theory that one man is as good as another. The Peels never shopped in St Luke's Square. Even in its golden days the Square could not have expected such a condescension. The Peels shopped in London or in Stafford; at a pinch, in Old-castle. That was the distinction for the ageing stout lady in black. Why, she had not in six years recovered from her surprise that her son and Matthew Peel-Swynnerton treated each other rudely as equals! She and Matthew did not often meet, but they liked each other. Her involuntary meekness flattered him. And his rather elaborate homage flattered her. He admired her fundamental goodness, and her occasional raps at Cyril seemed to put him into ecstasies of joy.

"Well, Mrs Povey," he greeted her, standing over her with his hat raised. (It was a fashion he had picked up in Paris.) "Here I am, you see."

"You're quite a stranger, Mr Matthew. I needn't ask you how you are. Have you been seeing anything of my boy lately?"

"Not since Wednesday," said Matthew. "Of course he's written to you?"

"There's no 'of course' about it," she laughed faintly. "I had a short letter from him on Wednesday morning. He said you were in Paris."

"But since that—hasn't he written?"

"If I hear from him on Sunday I shall be lucky, bless ye!" said Constance, grimly. "It's not letter-writing that will kill Cyril."

"But do you mean to say he hasn't—" Matthew stopped.

"Whatever's amiss?" asked Constance.

Matthew was at a loss to know what to do or say. "Oh, nothing."

"Now, Mr Matthew, do please—"Constance's tone had suddenly quite changed. It had become firm, commanding, and gravely suspicious. The conversation had ceased to be small-talk for her.

Matthew saw how nervous and how fragile she was. He had never noticed before that she was so sensitive to trifles, though it was notorious that nobody could safely discuss Cyril with her in terms of chaff. He was really astounded at that youth's carelessness, shameful carelessness. That Cyril's attitude to his mother was marked by a certain benevolent negligence—this Matthew knew; but not to have written to her with the important news concerning Mrs Scales was utterly inexcusable, and Matthew determined that he would tell Cyril so. He felt very sorry for Mrs Povey. She seemed pathetic to him, standing there in ignorance of a tremendous fact which she ought to have been aware of. He was very content that he had said nothing about Mrs Scales to anybody except his own mother, who had prudently enjoined silence upon him, saying that his one duty, having told Cyril, was to keep his mouth shut until the Poveys talked. Had it not been for his mother's advice he would assuredly have spread the amazing tale, and Mrs Povey might have first heard of it from a stranger's gossip, which would have been too cruel upon her.

"Oh!" Matthew tried to smile gaily, archly. "You're bound to hear from Cyril to-morrow."

He wanted to persuade her that he was concealing merely some delightful surprise from her. But he did not succeed. With all his experience of the world and of women, he was not clever enough to deceive that simple woman.

"I'm waiting, Mr Matthew," she said, in a tone that flattened the smile out of Matthew's sympathetic face. She was ruthless. The fact was, she had in an instant convinced herself that Cyril had met some girl and was engaged to be married. She could think of nothing else. "What has Cyril been doing?" she added, after a pause.

"It's nothing to do with Cyril," said he.

"Then what is it?"

"It was about—Mrs Scales," he murmured, nearly trembling. As she offered no response, merely looking around her in a peculiar fashion, he said: "Shall we walk along a bit?" And he turned in the direction in which she had been going. She obeyed the suggestion.

"What did ye say?" she asked. The name of Scales for a moment had no significance for her. But when she comprehended it she was afraid, and so she said vacantly, as though wishing to postpone a shock: "What did ye say?"

"I said it was about Mrs Scales. You know I m-met her in Paris." And he was saying to himself: "I ought not

to be telling this poor old thing here in the street. But what can I do?"

"Nay, nay!" she muttered.

She stopped and looked at him with a worried expression. Then he observed that the hand that carried her reticule was making strange purposeless curves in the air, and her rosy face went the colour of cream, as though it had been painted with one stroke of an unseen brush. Matthew was very much put about.

"Hadn't you better—" he began.

"Eh," she said; "I must sit me—" Her bag dropped.

He supported her to the door of Allman's shop, the ironmonger's. Unfortunately, there were two steps up into the shop, and she could not climb them. She collapsed like a sack of flour on the first step. Young Edward Allman ran to the door. He was wearing a black apron and fidgeting with it in his excitement.

"Don't lift her up—don't try to lift her up, Mr Peel-Swynnerton!" he cried, as Matthew instinctively began to do the wrong thing.

Matthew stopped, looking a fool and feeling one, and he and young Allman contemplated each other helpless for a second across the body of Constance Povey. A part of the Market Place now perceived that the unusual was occurring. It was Mr Shawcross, the chemist next door to Allman's, who dealt adequately with the situation. He had seen all, while selling a Kodak to a young lady, and he ran out with salts. Constance recovered very rapidly. She had not quite swooned. She gave a long sigh, and whispered weakly that she was all right. The three men helped her into the lofty dark shop, which smelt of nails and of stove-polish, and she was balanced on a rickety chair.

"My word!" exclaimed young Allman, in his loud voice, when she could smile and the pink was returning reluctantly to her cheeks. "You mustn't frighten us like that, Mrs Povey!"

Matthew said nothing. He had at last created a genuine sensation. Once again he felt like a criminal, and could not understand why.

Constance announced that she would walk slowly home, down the Cock-yard and along Wedgwood Street But when, glancing round in her returned strength, she saw the hedge of faces at the doorway, she agreed with Mr Shawcross that she would do better to have a cab. Young Allman went to the door and whistled to the unique cab that stands for ever at the grand entrance to the Town Hall.

"Mr Matthew will come with me," said Constance.

"Certainly, with pleasure," said Matthew.

And she passed through the little crowd of gapers on Mr Shawcross's arm.

"Just take care of yourself, missis," said Mr Shawcross to her, through the window of the cab, "It's fainting weather, and we're none of us any younger, seemingly."

She nodded.

"I'm awfully sorry I upset you, Mrs Povey," said Matthew, when the cab moved.

She shook her head, refusing his apology as unnecessary. Tears filled her eyes. In less than a minute the cab had stopped in front of Constance's light-grained door. She demanded her reticule from Matthew, who had carried it since it fell. She would pay the cabman. Never before had Matthew permitted a woman to pay for a cab in which he had ridden; but there was no arguing with Constance. Constance was dangerous.

Amy Bates, still inhabiting the cave, had seen the cab-wheels through the grating of her window and had panted up the kitchen stairs to open the door ere Constance had climbed the steps. Amy, decidedly over forty, was a woman of authority. She wanted to know what was the matter, and Constance had to tell her that she had "felt unwell." Amy took the hat and mantle and departed to prepare a cup of tea. When they were alone Constance said to Matthew:

"Now, Mr Matthew, will you please tell me?"

"It's only this," he began.

And as he told it, in quite a few words, it indeed had the air of being "only that." And yet his voice shook, in sympathy with the ageing woman's controlled but visible emotion. It seemed to him that gladness should have filled the absurd little parlour, but the spirit that presided had no name; it was certainly not joy. He himself felt very sad, desolated. He would have given much money to have been spared the experience. He knew simply that in the memory of the stout, comical, nice woman in the rocking-chair he had stirred old, old things, wakened slumbers that might have been eternal. He did not know that he was sitting on the very spot where the sofa had been on which Samuel Povey lay when a beautiful and shameless young creature of fifteen extracted his tooth. He did not know that Constance was sitting in the very chair in which the memorable Mrs Baines had sat in vain conflict with that same unconquerable girl. He did not know ten thousand matters that were rushing violently about in the vast heart of Constance.

She cross-questioned him in detail. But she did not put the questions which he in his innocence expected; such as, if her sister looked old, if her hair was grey, if she was stout or thin. And until Amy, mystified and resentful, had served the tea, on a little silver tray, she remained comparatively calm. It was in the middle of a gulp of tea that she broke down, and Matthew had to take the cup from her.

"I can't thank you, Mr Matthew," she wept. "I couldn't thank you enough."

"But I've done nothing," he protested.

She shook her head. "I never hoped for this. Never hoped for it!" she went on. "It makes me so happy—in a

way . . . You mustn't take any notice of me. I'm silly. You must kindly write down that address for me. And I must write to Cyril at once. And I must see Mr Critchlow."

"It's really very funny that Cyril hasn't written to you," said Matthew.

"Cyril has not been a good son," she said with sudden, solemn coldness. "To think that he should have kept that . . . !" She wept again.

At length Matthew saw the possibility of leaving. He felt her warm, soft, crinkled hand round his fingers.

"You've behaved very nicely over this," she said. "And very cleverly. In *every* thing—both over there and here. Nobody could have shown a nicer feeling than you've shown. It's a great comfort to me that my son has got you for a friend."

When he thought of his escapades, and of all the knowledge, unutterable in Bursley, fantastically impossible in Bursley, which he had imparted to her son, he marvelled that the maternal instinct should be so deceived. Still, he felt that her praise of him was deserved.

Outside, he gave vent to a "Phew" of relief. He smiled, in his worldliest manner. But the smile was a sham. A pretence to himself! A childish attempt to disguise from himself how profoundly he had been moved by a natural scene!

IV

On the night when Matthew Peel-Swynnerton spoke to Mrs Scales, Matthew was not the only person in the Pension Frensham who failed to sleep. When the old portress came downstairs from her errand, she observed that her mistress was leaving the mahogany retreat.

"She is sleeping tranquilly, the poor one!" said the portress, discharging her commission, which had been to learn the latest news of the mistress's indisposed dog, Fossette. In saying this her ancient, vibrant voice was rich with sympathy for the suffering animal. And she smiled. She was rather like a figure out of an almshouse, with her pink, apparently brittle skin, her tight black dress, and frilled white cap. She stooped habitually, and always walked quickly, with her head a few inches in advance of her feet. Her grey hair was scanty. She was old; nobody perhaps knew exactly how old. Sophia had taken her with the Pension, over a quarter of a century before, because she was old and could not easily have found another place. Although the *clientèle* was almost exclusively English, she spoke only French, explaining herself to Britons by means of benevolent smiles.

"I think I shall go to bed, Jacqueline," said the mistress, in reply.

A strange reply, thought Jacqueline. The unalterable custom of Jacqueline was to retire at midnight and to rise at five-thirty. Her mistress also usually retired about midnight, and during the final hour mistress and portress saw a good deal of each other. And considering that Jacqueline had just been sent up into the mistress's own bedroom to glance at Fossette, and that the bulletin was satisfactory, and that madame and Jacqueline had several customary daily matters to discuss, it seemed odd that madame should thus be going instantly to bed. However, Jacqueline said nothing but:

"Very well, madame. And the number 32?"

"Arrange yourself as you can," said the mistress, curtly.

"It is well, madame. Good evening, madame, and a good night."

Jacqueline, alone in the hall, re-entered her box and set upon one of those endless, mysterious tasks which occupied her when she was not rushing to and fro or whistling up the tubes.

Sophia, scarcely troubling even to glance into Fossette's round basket, undressed, put out the light, and got into bed. She felt extremely and inexplicably gloomy. She did not wish to reflect; she strongly wished not to reflect; but her mind insisted on reflection—a monotonous, futile, and distressing reflection. Povey! Povey! Could this be Constance's Povey, the unique Samuel Povey? That is to say, not he, but his son, Constance's son. Had Constance a grown-up son? Constance must be over fifty now, perhaps a grandmother! Had she really married Samuel Povey? Possibly she was dead. Certainly her mother must be dead, and Aunt Harriet and Mr Critchlow. If alive, her mother must be at least eighty years of age.

The cumulative effect of merely remaining inactive when one ought to be active, was terrible. Undoubtedly she should have communicated with her family. It was silly not to have done so. After all, even if she had, as a child, stolen a trifle of money from her wealthy aunt, what would that have mattered? She had been proud. She was criminally proud. That was her vice. She admitted it frankly. But she could not alter her pride. Everybody had some weak spot. Her reputation for sagacity, for common sense, was, she knew, enormous; she always felt, when people were talking to her, that they regarded her as a very unusually wise woman. And yet she had been guilty of the capital folly of cutting herself off from her family. She was ageing, and she was alone in the world. She was enriching herself; she had the most perfectly managed and the most respectable Pension in the world (she sincerely believed), and she was alone in the world. Acquaintances she had—French people who never offered nor accepted hospitality other than tea or wine, and one or two members of the English commercial colony—but her one friend was Fossette, aged three years! She was the most solitary person on earth. She had heard no word of Gerald, no word of anybody. Nobody whatever could truly be interested in her fate. This was what she had achieved after a quarter of a century of ceaseless labour and

anxiety, during which she had not once been away from the Rue Lord Byron for more than thirty hours at a stretch. It was appalling—the passage of years; and the passage of years would grow more appalling. Ten years hence, where would she be? She pictured herself dying. Horrible!

Of course there was nothing to prevent her from going back to Bursley and repairing the grand error of her girlhood. No, nothing except the fact that her whole soul recoiled from the mere idea of any such enterprise! She was a fixture in the Rue Lord Byron. She was a part of the street. She knew all that happened or could happen there. She was attached to it by the heavy chains of habit. In the chill way of long use she loved it. There! The incandescent gas-burner of the street lamp outside had been turned down, as it was turned down every night! If it is possible to love such a phenomenon, she loved that phenomenon. That phenomenon was a portion of her life, dear to her.

An agreeable young man, that Peel-Swynnerton! Then evidently, since her days in Bursley, the Peels and the Swynnertons, partners in business, must have intermarried or there must have been some affair of a will. Did he suspect who she was? He had had a very self-conscious, guilty look. No! He could not have suspected who she was. The idea was ridiculous. Probably he did not even know that her name was Scales. And even if he knew her name, he had probably never heard of Gerald Scales or the story of her flight. Why, he could not have been born until after she had left Bursley! Besides, the Peels were always quite aloof from the ordinary social life of the town. No! He could not have suspected her identity. It was infantile to conceive such a thing.

And yet, she inconsequently proceeded in the tangle of her afflicted mind, supposing he had suspected it! Supposing by some queer chance he had heard her forgotten story, and casually put two and two together! Supposing even that he were merely to mention in the Five Towns that the Pension Frensham was kept by a Mrs Scales. “Scales? Scales?” people might repeat. “Now, what does that remind me of?” And the ball might roll and roll till Constance or somebody picked it up! And then . . .

Moreover—a detail of which she had at first unaccountably failed to mark the significance—this Peel-Swynnerton was a friend of the Mr Povey as to whom he had inquired . . . In that case it could not be the same Povey. Impossible that the Peels should be on terms of friendship with Samuel Povey or his connexions! But supposing after all they were! Supposing something utterly unanticipated and revolutionary had happened in the Five Towns!

She was disturbed. She was insecure. She foresaw inquiries being made concerning her. She foresaw an immense family fuss, endless tomfoolery, the upsetting of her existence, the destruction of her calm. And she sank away from that prospect. She could not face it. She did not want to face it. “No,” she cried passionately in her soul, “I’ve lived alone, and I’ll stay as I am. I can’t change at my time of life.” And her attitude towards a possible invasion of her solitude became one of resentment. “I won’t have it! I won’t have it! I will be left alone. Constance! What can Constance be to me, or I to her, now?” The vision of any change in her existence was in the highest degree painful to her. And not only painful. It frightened her. It made her shrink. But she could not dismiss it . . . She could not argue herself out of it. The apparition of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton had somehow altered the very stuff of her fibres.

And surging on the outskirts of the central storm of her brain were ten thousand apprehensions about the management of the Pension. All was black, hopeless. The Pension might have been the most complete business failure that gross carelessness and incapacity had ever provoked. Was it not the fact that she had to supervise everything herself, that she could depend on no one? Were she to be absent even for a single day the entire structure would inevitably fall. Instead of working less she worked harder. And who could guarantee that her investments were safe?

When dawn announced itself, slowly discovering each object in the chamber, she was ill. Fever seemed to rage in her head. And in and round her mouth she had strange sensations. Fossette stirred in the basket near the large desk on which multifarious files and papers were ranged with minute particularity.

“Fossette!” she tried to call out; but no sound issued from her lips. She could not move her tongue. She tried to protrude it, and could not. For hours she had been conscious of a headache. Her heart sank. She was sick with fear. Her memory flashed to her father and his seizure. She was his daughter! Paralysis! “Ç a serait le comble!” she thought in French, horrified. Her fear became abject! “Can I move at all?” she thought, and madly jerked her head. Yes, she could move her head slightly on the pillow, and she could stretch her right arm, both arms. Absurd cowardice! Of course it was not a seizure! She reassured herself. Still, she could not put her tongue out. Suddenly she began to hiccough, and she had no control over the hiccough. She put her hand to the bell, whose ringing would summon the man who slept in a pantry off the hall, and suddenly the hiccough ceased. Her hand dropped. She was better. Besides, what use in ringing for a man if she could not speak to him through the door? She must wait for Jacqueline. At six o’clock every morning, summer and winter, Jacqueline entered her mistress’s bedroom to release the dog for a moment’s airing under her own supervision. The clock on the mantelpiece showed five minutes past three. She had three hours to wait. Fossette pattered across the room, and sprang on to the bed and nestled down. Sophia ignored her, but Fossette, being herself unwell and torpid, did not seem to care.

Jacqueline was late. In the quarter of an hour between six o’clock and a quarter past, Sophia suffered the supreme pangs of despair and verged upon insanity. It appeared to her that her cranium would blow off under pressure from within. Then the door opened silently, a few inches. Usually Jacqueline came into the room, but

sometimes she stood behind the door and called in her soft, trembling voice, “Fossette! Fossette!” And on this morning she did not come into the room. The dog did not immediately respond. Sophia was in an agony. She marshalled all her volition, all her self-control and strength, to shout:

“*Jacqueline!*”

It came out of her, a horribly difficult and misshapen birth, but it came. She was exhausted.

“Yes, madame.” Jacqueline entered.

As soon as she had a glimpse of Sophia she threw up her hands. Sophia stared at her, wordless.

“I will fetch the doctor—myself,” whispered Jacqueline, and fled.

“*Jacqueline!*” The woman stopped. Then Sophia determined to force herself to make a speech, and she braced her muscles to an unprecedented effort. “Say not a word to the others.” She could not bear that the whole household should know of her illness. Jacqueline nodded and vanished, the dog following. Jacqueline understood. She lived in the place with her mistress as with a fellow-conspirator.

Sophia began to feel better. She could get into a sitting posture, though the movement made her dizzy. By working to the foot of the bed she could see herself in the glass of the wardrobe. And she saw that the lower part of her face was twisted out of shape.

The doctor, who knew her, and who earned a lot of money in her house, told her frankly what had happened. *Paralysie glosso-labio-laryngée* was the phrase he used. She understood. A very slight attack; due to overwork and worry. He ordered absolute rest and quiet.

“Impossible!” she said, genuinely convinced that she alone was indispensable.

“Repose the most absolute!” he repeated.

She marvelled that a few words with a man who chanced to be named Peel-Swynnerton could have resulted in such a disaster, and drew a curious satisfaction from this fearful proof that she was so highly-strung. But even then she did not realize how profoundly she had been disturbed.

V

“My darling Sophia—”

The inevitable miracle had occurred. Her suspicions concerning that Mr Peel-Swynnerton were well-founded, after all! Here was a letter from Constance! The writing on the envelope was not Constance’s; but even before examining it she had had a peculiar qualm. She received letters from England nearly every day asking about rooms and prices (and on many of them she had to pay threepence excess postage, because the writers carelessly or carefully forgot that a penny stamp was not sufficient); there was nothing to distinguish this envelope, and yet her first glance at it had startled her; and when, deciphering the smudged postmark, she made out the word “Bursley,” her heart did literally seem to stop, and she opened the letter in quite violent tremulation, thinking to herself: “The doctor would say this is very bad for me.” Six days had elapsed since her attack, and she was wonderfully better; the distortion of her face had almost disappeared. But the doctor was grave; he ordered no medicine, merely a tonic; and monotonously insisted on “repose the most absolute,” on perfect mental calm. He said little else, allowing Sophia to judge from his silences the seriousness of her condition. Yes, the receipt of such a letter must be bad for her!

She controlled herself while she read it, lying in her dressing-gown against several pillows on the bed; a mist did not form in her eyes, nor did she sob, nor betray physically that she was not reading an order for two rooms for a week. But the expenditure of nervous force necessary to self-control was terrific.

Constance’s handwriting had changed; it was, however, easily recognizable as a development of the neat calligraphy of the girl who could print window-tickets. The “S” of Sophia was formed in the same way as she had formed it in the last letter which she had received from her at Axe!

My Darling Sophia,

I cannot tell you how overjoyed I was to learn that after all these years you are alive and well, and doing so well too. I long to see you, my dear sister. It was Mr Peel-Swynnerton who told me. He is a friend of Cyril’s. Cyril is the name of my son. I married Samuel in 1867. Cyril was born in 1874 at Christmas. He is now twenty-two, and doing very well in London as a student of sculpture, though so young. He won a National Scholarship. There were only eight, of which he won one, in all England. Samuel died in 1888. If you read the papers you must have seen about the Povey affair. I mean of course Mr Daniel Povey, Confectioner. It was that that killed poor Samuel. Poor mother died in 1875. It doesn’t seem so long. Aunt Harriet and Aunt Maria are both dead. Old Dr Harrop is dead, and his son has practically retired. He has a partner, a Scotchman. Mr Critchlow has married Miss Insull. Did you ever hear of such a thing? They have taken over the shop, and I live in the house part, the other being bricked up. Business in the Square is not what it used to be. The steam trams take all the custom to Hanbridge, and they are talking of electric trams, but I dare say it is only talk. I have a fairly good servant. She has been with me a long time, but servants are not what they were. I keep pretty well, except for my sciatica and palpitation. Since Cyril went to London I have been very lonely. But I try to cheer up and count my blessings. I am sure I have a great deal to be thankful for. And now this news of you! Please write to me a long letter, and tell me all about yourself. It is a long way to Paris. But surely now you know I am still here, you will come and pay me a visit—at least. Everybody would be *most* glad to see

you. And I should be so proud and glad. As I say, I am all alone. Mr Critchlow says I am to say there is a deal of money waiting for you. You know he is the trustee. There is the half-share of mother's and also of Aunt Harriet's, and it has been accumulating. By the way, they are getting up a subscription for Miss Chetwynd, poor old thing. Her sister is dead, and she is in poverty. I have put myself down for £20. Now, my dear sister, please do write to me at once. You see it is still the old address. I remain, my darling Sophia, with much love, your affectionate sister,

Constance Povey.

P.S.—I should have written yesterday, but I was not fit. Every time I sat down to write, I cried.

"Of course," said Sophia to Fossette, "she expects me to go to her, instead of her coming to me! And yet who's the busiest?"

But this observation was not serious. It was merely a trifle of affectionate malicious embroidery that Sophia put on the edge of her deep satisfaction. The very spirit of simple love seemed to emanate from the paper on which Constance had written. And this spirit woke suddenly and completely Sophia's love for Constance. Constance! At that moment there was assuredly for Sophia no creature in the world like Constance. Constance personified for her the qualities of the Baines family. Constance's letter was a great letter, a perfect letter, perfect in its artlessness; the natural expression of the Baines character at its best. Not an awkward reference in the whole of it! No clumsy expression of surprise at anything that she, Sophia, had done, or failed to do! No mention of Gerald! Just a sublime acceptance of the situation as it was, and the assurance of undiminished love! Tact? No; it was something finer than tact! Tact was conscious, skilful. Sophia was certain that the notion of tactfulness had not entered Constance's head. Constance had simply written out of her heart. And that was what made the letter so splendid. Sophia was convinced that no one but a Baines could have written such a letter.

She felt that she must rise to the height of that letter, that she too must show her Baines blood. And she went primly to her desk, and began to write (on private notepaper) in that imperious large hand of hers that was so different from Constance's. She began a little stiffly, but after a few lines her generous and passionate soul was responding freely to the appeal of Constance. She asked that Mr Critchlow should pay £20 for her to the Miss Chetwynd fund. She spoke of her Pension and of Paris, and of her pleasure in Constance's letter. But she said nothing as to Gerald, nor as to the possibility of a visit to the Five Towns. She finished the letter in a blaze of love, and passed from it as from a dream to the sterile banality of the daily life of the Pension Frensham, feeling that, compared to Constance's affection, nothing else had any worth.

But she would not consider the project of going to Bursley. Never, never would she go to Bursley. If Constance chose to come to Paris and see her, she would be delighted, but she herself would not budge. The mere notion of any change in her existence intimidated her. And as for returning to Bursley itself . . . no, no!

Nevertheless, at the Pension Frensham, the future could not be as the past. Sophia's health forbade that. She knew that the doctor was right. Every time that she made an effort, she knew intimately and speedily that the doctor was right. Only her will-power was unimpaired; the machinery by which will-power is converted into action was mysteriously damaged. She was aware of the fact. But she could not face it yet. Time would have to elapse before she could bring herself to face that fact. She was getting an old woman. She could no longer draw on reserves. Yet she persisted to everyone that she was quite recovered, and was abstaining from her customary work simply from an excess of prudence. Certainly her face had recovered. And the Pension, being a machine all of whose parts were in order, continued to run, apparently, with its usual smoothness. It is true that the excellent chef began to peculate, but as his cuisine did not suffer, the result was not noticeable for a long period. The whole staff and many of the guests knew that Sophia had been indisposed; and they knew no more.

When by hazard Sophia observed a fault in the daily conduct of the house, her first impulse was to go to the root of it and cure it, her second was to leave it alone, or to palliate it by some superficial remedy. Unperceived, and yet vaguely suspected by various people, the decline of the Pension Frensham had set in. The tide, having risen to its highest, was receding, but so little that no one could be sure that it had turned. Every now and then it rushed up again and washed the farthest stone.

Sophia and Constance exchanged several letters. Sophia said repeatedly that she could not leave Paris. At length she roundly asked Constance to come and pay her a visit. She made the suggestion with fear—for the prospect of actually seeing her beloved Constance alarmed her—but she could do no less than make it. And in a few days she had a reply to say that Constance would have come, under Cyril's charge, but that her sciatica was suddenly much worse, and she was obliged to lie down every day after dinner to rest her legs. Travelling was impossible for her. The fates were combining against Sophia's decision.

And now Sophia began to ask herself about her duty to Constance. The truth was that she was groping round to find an excuse for reversing her decision. She was afraid to reverse it, yet tempted. She had the desire to do something which she objected to doing. It was like the desire to throw one's self over a high balcony. It drew her, drew her, and she drew back against it. The Pension was now tedious to her. It bored her even to pretend to be the supervising head of the Pension. Throughout the house discipline had loosened.

She wondered when Mr Mardon would renew his overtures for the transformation of her enterprise into a limited company. In spite of herself she would deliberately cross his path and give him opportunities to begin

on the old theme. He had never before left her in peace for so long a period. No doubt she had, upon his last assault, absolutely convinced him that his efforts had no smallest chance of success, and he had made up his mind to cease them. With a single word she could wind him up again. The merest hint, one day when he was paying his bill, and he would be beseeching her. But she could not utter the word.

Then she began to say openly that she did not feel well, that the house was too much for her, and that the doctor had imperatively commanded rest. She said this to everyone except Mardon. And everyone somehow persisted in not saying it to Mardon. The doctor having advised that she should spend more time in the open air, she would take afternoon drives in the Bois with Fossette. It was October. But Mr Mardon never seemed to hear of those drives.

One morning he met her in the street outside the house.

"I'm sorry to hear you're so unwell," he said confidentially, after they had discussed the health of Fossette.

"So unwell!" she exclaimed as if resenting the statement. "Who told you I was so unwell?"

"Jacqueline. She told me you often said that what you needed was a complete change. And it seems the doctor says so, too."

"Oh! doctors!" she murmured, without however denying the truth of Jacqueline's assertion. She saw hope in Mr Mardon's eyes.

"Of course, you know," he said, still more confidently, "if you *should* happen to change your mind, I'm always ready to form a little syndicate to take this"—he waved discreetly at the Pension—"off your hands."

She shook her head violently, which was strange, considering that for weeks she had been wishing to hear such words from Mr Mardon.

"You needn't give it up altogether," he said. "You could retain your hold on it. We'd make you manageress, with a salary and a share in the profits. You'd be mistress just as much as you are now."

"Oh!" said she carelessly. "*If I gave it up, I should give it up entirely*. No half measures for me."

With the utterance of that sentence, the history of Frensham's as a private undertaking was brought to a close. Sophia knew it. Mr Mardon knew it. Mr Mardon's heart leapt. He saw in his imagination the formation of the preliminary syndicate, with himself at its head, and then the re-sale by the syndicate to a limited company at a profit. He saw a nice little profit for his own private personal self of a thousand or so—gained in a moment. The plant, his hope, which he had deemed dead, blossomed with miraculous suddenness.

"Well," he said. "Give it up entirely, then! Take a holiday for life. You've deserved it, Mrs Scales."

She shook her head once again.

"Think it over," he said.

"I gave you my answer years ago," she said obstinately, while fearing lest he should take her at her word.

"Oblige me by thinking it over," he said. "I'll mention it to you again in a few days."

"It will be no use," she said.

He took his leave, waddling down the street in his vague clothes, conscious of his fame as Lewis Mardon, the great house-agent of the Champs Elysées, known throughout Europe and America.

In a few days he did mention it again.

"There's only one thing that makes me dream of it even for a moment," said Sophia. "And that is my sister's health."

"Your sister!" he exclaimed. He did not know she had a sister. Never had she spoken of her family.

"Yes. Her letters are beginning to worry me."

"Does she live in Paris?"

"No. In Staffordshire. She has never left home."

And to preserve her pride intact she led Mr Mardon to think that Constance was in a most serious way, whereas in truth Constance had nothing worse than her sciatica, and even that was somewhat better.

Thus she yielded.

CHAPTER II

THE MEETING

Soon after dinner one day in the following spring, Mr Critchlow knocked at Constance's door. She was seated in the rocking-chair in front of the fire in the parlour. She wore a large "rough" apron, and with the outlying parts of the apron she was rubbing the moisture out of the coat of a young wire-haired fox-terrier, for whom no more original name had been found than "Spot." It is true that he had a spot. Constance had more than once called the world to witness that she would never have a young dog again, because, as she said, she could not be always running about after them, and they ate the stuffing out of the furniture. But her last dog had lived too long; a dog can do worse things than eat furniture; and, in her natural reaction against age in dogs, and also in the hope of postponing as long as possible the inevitable sorrow and upset which death causes when it takes off a domestic pet, she had not known how to refuse the very desirable fox-terrier aged ten months that an acquaintance had offered to her. Spot's beautiful pink skin could be seen under his disturbed hair; he was exquisitely soft to the touch, and to himself he was loathsome. His eyes continually peeped forth between corners of the agitated towel, and they were full of inquietude and shame.

Amy was assisting at this performance, gravely on the watch to see that Spot did not escape into the coal-cellar. She opened the door to Mr Critchlow's knock. Mr Critchlow entered without any formalities, as usual. He did not seem to have changed. He had the same quantity of white hair, he wore the same long white apron, and his voice (which showed, however, an occasional tendency to shrillness) had the same grating quality. He stood fairly straight. He was carrying a newspaper in his vellum hand.

"Well, missis!" he said.

"That will do, thank you, Amy," said Constance, quietly. Amy went slowly.

"So ye're washing him for her!" said Mr Critchlow.

"Yes," Constance admitted. Spot glanced sharply at the aged man.

"An' ye seen this bit in the paper about Sophia?" he asked, holding the *Signal* for her inspection.

"About Sophia?" cried Constance. "What's amiss?"

"Nothing's amiss. But they've got it. It's in the 'Staffordshire day by day' column. Here! I'll read it ye." He drew a long wooden spectacle-case from his waistcoat pocket, and placed a second pair of spectacles on his nose. Then he sat down on the sofa, his knees sticking out pointedly, and read: " 'We understand that Mrs Sophia Scales, proprietress of the famous Pension Frensham in the Rue Lord Byron, Paris'—it's that famous that nobody in th' Five Towns has ever heard of it—'is about to pay a visit to her native town, Bursley, after an absence of over thirty years. Mrs Scales belonged to the well-known and highly respected family of Baines. She has recently disposed of the Pension Frensham to a limited company, and we are betraying no secret in stating that the price paid ran well into five figures.' So ye see!" Mr Critchlow commented.

"How do those *Signal* people find out things?" Constance murmured.

"Eh, bless ye, I don't know," said Mr Critchlow.

This was an untruth. Mr Critchlow had himself given the information to the new editor of the *Signal,* who had soon been made aware of Critchlow's passion for the Press, and who knew how to make use of it.

"I wish it hadn't appeared just today," said Constance.

"Why?"

"Oh! I don't know, I wish it hadn't."

"Well, I'll be touring on, missis," said Mr Critchlow, meaning that he would go.

He left the paper, and descended the steps with senile deliberation. It was characteristic that he had shown no curiosity whatever as to the details of Sophia's arrival.

Constance removed her apron, wrapped Spot up in it, and put him in a corner of the sofa. She then abruptly sent Amy out to buy a penny time-table.

"I thought you were going by tram to Knype," Amy observed.

"I have decided to go by train," said Constance, with cold dignity, as if she had decided the fate of nations. She hated such observations from Amy, who unfortunately lacked, in an increasing degree, the supreme gift of unquestioning obedience.

When Amy came breathlessly back, she found Constance in her bedroom, withdrawing crumpled balls of paper from the sleeves of her second-best mantle. Constance scarcely ever wore this mantle. In theory it was destined for chapel on wet Sundays; in practice it had remained long in the wardrobe, Sundays having been obstinately fine for weeks and weeks together. It was a mantle that Constance had never really liked. But she was not going to Knype to meet Sophia in her everyday mantle; and she had no intention of donning her best mantle for such an excursion. To make her first appearance before Sophia in the best mantle she had—this would have been a sad mistake of tactics! Not only would it have led to an anti-climax on Sunday, but it would have given to Constance the air of being in awe of Sophia. Now Constance was in truth a little afraid of Sophia; in thirty years Sophia might have grown into anything, whereas Constance had remained just Constance. Paris was a great place; and it was immensely far off. And the mere sound of that limited company business was intimidating. Imagine Sophia having by her own efforts created something which a real limited company wanted to buy and had bought! Yes, Constance was afraid, but she did not mean to show her fear in her mantle. After all, she was the elder. And she had her dignity too—and a lot of it—tucked away in her secret heart, hidden within the mildness of that soft exterior. So she had decided on the second-best mantle, which, being seldom used, had its sleeves stuffed with paper to the end that they might keep their shape and

their “fall.” The little balls of paper were strewed over the bed.

“There’s a train at a quarter to three, gets to Knype at ten minutes past,” said Amy, officiously. “But supposing it was only three minutes late and the London train was prompt, then you might miss her. Happen you’d better take the two fifteen to be on the safe side.”

“Let me look,” said Constance, firmly. “Please put all this paper in the wardrobe.”

She would have preferred not to follow Amy’s suggestion, but it was so incontestably wise that she was obliged to accept it.

“Unless you go by tram,” said Amy. “That won’t mean starting quite so soon.”

But Constance would not go by tram. If she took the tram she would be bound to meet people who had read the *Signal,* and who would say, with their stupid vacuity: “Going to meet your sister at Knype?” And then tiresome conversations would follow. Whereas, in the train, she would choose a compartment, and would be far less likely to encounter chatterers.

There was now not a minute to lose. And the excitement which had been growing in that house for days past, under a pretence of calm, leapt out swiftly into the light of the sun, and was unashamed. Amy had to help her mistress make herself as comely as she could be made without her best dress, mantle, and bonnet. Amy was frankly consulted as to effects. The barrier of class was lowered for a space. Many years had elapsed since Constance had been conscious of a keen desire to look smart. She was reminded of the days when, in full fig for chapel, she would dash downstairs on a Sunday morning, and, assuming a pose for inspection at the threshold of the parlour, would demand of Samuel: “Shall I do?” Yes, she used to dash downstairs, like a child, and yet in those days she had thought herself so sedate and mature! She sighed, half with lancinating regret, and half in gentle disdain of that mercurial creature aged less than thirty. At fifty-one she regarded herself as old. And she was old. And Amy had the tricks and manners of an old spinster. Thus the excitement in the house was an “old” excitement, and, like Constance’s desire to look smart, it had its ridiculous side, which was also its tragic side, the side that would have made a boor guffaw, and a hysterical fool cry, and a wise man meditate sadly upon the earth’s fashion of renewing itself.

At half past one Constance was dressed, with the exception of her gloves. She looked at the clock a second time to make sure that she might safely glance round the house without fear of missing the train. She went up into the bedroom on the second floor, her and Sophia’s old bedroom, which she had prepared with enormous care for Sophia. The airing of that room had been an enterprise of days, for, save by a minister during the sittings of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference at Bursley, it had never been occupied since the era when Maria Insull used occasionally to sleep in the house. Cyril clung to his old room on his visits. Constance had an ample supply of solid and stately furniture, and the chamber destined for Sophia was lightened in every corner by the reflections of polished mahogany. It was also fairly impregnated with the odour of furniture paste—an odour of which no housewife need be ashamed. Further, it had been re-papered in a delicate blue, with one of the new “art” patterns. It was a “Baines” room. And Constance did not care where Sophia came from, nor what Sophia had been accustomed to, nor into what limited company Sophia had been transformed —that room was adequate! It could not have been improved upon. You had only to look at the crocheted mats —even those on the washstand under the white-and-gold ewer and other utensils. It was folly to expose such mats to the splashings of a washstand, but it was sublime folly. Sophia might remove them if she cared. Constance was house-proud; house-pride had slumbered within her; now it blazed forth.

A fire brightened the drawing-room, which was a truly magnificent apartment, a museum of valuables collected by the Baines and the Maddack families since the year 1840, tempered by the last novelties in antimacassars and cloths. In all Bursley there could have been few drawing-rooms to compare with Constance’s. Constance knew it. She was not afraid of her drawing-room being seen by anybody.

She passed for an instant into her own bedroom, where Amy was patiently picking balls of paper from the bed.

“Now you quite understand about tea?” Constance asked.

“Oh yes, ’m,” said Amy, as if to say: “How much oftener are you going to ask me that question?” “Are you off now, ’m?”

“Yes,” said Constance. “Come and fasten the front door after me.”

They descended together to the parlour. A white cloth for tea lay folded on the table. It was of the finest damask that skill could choose and money buy. It was fifteen years old, and had never been spread. Constance would not have produced it for the first meal, had she not possessed two others of equal eminence. On the harmonium were arranged several jams and cakes, a Bursley pork-pie, and some pickled salmon; with the necessary silver. All was there. Amy could not go wrong. And crocuses were in the vases on the mantelpiece. Her “garden,” in the phrase which used to cause Samuel to think how extraordinarily feminine she was! It was a long time since she had had a “garden” on the mantelpiece. Her interest in her chronic sciatica and in her palpitations had grown at the expense of her interest in gardens. Often, when she had finished the complicated processes by which her furniture and other goods were kept in order, she had strength only to “rest.” She was rather a fragile, small, fat woman, soon out of breath, easily marred. This business of preparing for the advent of Sophia had appeared to her genuinely colossal. However, she had come through it very well. She was in pretty good health; only a little tired, and more than a little anxious and nervous, as she

gave the last glance.

"Take away that apron, do!" she said to Amy, pointing to the rough apron in the corner of the sofa. "By the way, where is Spot?"

"Spot, m'm?" Amy ejaculated.

Both their hearts jumped. Amy instinctively looked out of the window. He was there, sure enough, in the gutter, studying the indescribabilities of King Street. He had obviously escaped when Amy came in from buying the time-table. The woman's face was guilty.

"Amy, I wonder *at* you!" exclaimed Constance, tragically. She opened the door.

"Well, I never did see the like of that dog!" murmured Amy.

"Spot!" his mistress commanded. "Come here at once. Do you hear me?"

Spot turned sharply and gazed motionless at Constance. Then with a toss of the head he dashed off to the corner of the Square, and gazed motionless again. Amy went forth to catch him. After an age she brought him in, squealing. He was in a state exceedingly offensive to the eye and to the nose. He had effectively got rid of the smell of the soap, which he loathed. Constance could have wept. It did really appear to her that nothing had gone right that day. And Spot had the most innocent, trustful air. Impossible to make him realize that his aunt Sophia was coming. He would have sold his entire family into servitude in order to buy ten yards of King Street gutter.

"You must wash him in the scullery, that's all there is for it," said Constance, controlling herself. "Put that apron on, and don't forget one of your new aprons when you open the door. Better shut him up in Mr Cyril's bedroom when you've dried him."

And she went, charged with worries, clasping her bag and her umbrella and smoothing her gloves, and spying downwards at the folds of her mantle.

"That's a funny way to go to Bursley Station, that is," said Amy, observing that Constance was descending King Street instead of crossing it into Wedgwood Street. And she caught Spot "a fair clout on the head," to indicate to him that she had him alone in the house now.

Constance was taking a round-about route to the station, so that, if stopped by acquaintances, she should not be too obviously going to the station. Her feelings concerning the arrival of Sophia, and concerning the town's attitude towards it, were very complex.

She was forced to hurry. And she had risen that morning with plans perfectly contrived for the avoidance of hurry. She disliked hurry because it always "put her about."

II

The express from London was late, so that Constance had three-quarters of an hour of the stony calmness of Knype platform when it is waiting for a great train. At last the porters began to cry, "Macclesfield, Stockport, and Manchester train"; the immense engine glided round the curve, dwarfing the carriages behind it, and Constance had a supreme tremor. The calmness of the platform was transformed into a *mêlée*. Little Constance found herself left on the fringe of a physically agitated crowd which was apparently trying to scale a precipice surmounted by windows and doors from whose apertures looked forth defenders of the train. Knype platform seemed as if it would never be reduced to order again. And Constance did not estimate highly the chances of picking out an unknown Sophia from that welter. She was very seriously perturbed. All the muscles of her face were drawn as her gaze wandered anxiously from end to end of the train.

Presently she saw a singular dog. Other people also saw it. It was of the colour of chocolate; it had a head and shoulders richly covered with hair that hung down in thousands of tufts like the tufts of a modern mop such as is bought in shops. This hair stopped suddenly rather less than half-way along the length of the dog's body, the remainder of which was naked and as smooth as marble. The effect was to give to the inhabitants of the Five Towns the impression that the dog had forgotten an essential part of its attire and was outraging decency. The ball of hair which had been allowed to grow on the dog's tail, and the circles of hair which ornamented its ankles, only served to intensify the impression of indecency. A pink ribbon round its neck completed the outrage. The animal had absolutely the air of a decked trollop. A chain ran taut from the creature's neck into the middle of a small crowd of persons gesticulating over trunks, and Constance traced it to a tall and distinguished woman in a coat and skirt with a rather striking hat. A beautiful and aristocratic woman, Constance thought, at a distance! Then the strange idea came to her: "That's Sophia!" she was sure. . . . She was not sure. . . She was sure. The woman emerged from the crowd. Her eye fell on Constance. They both hesitated, and, as it were, wavered uncertainly towards each other.

"I should have known you anywhere," said Sophia, with apparently careless tranquillity, as she stooped to kiss Constance, raising her veil.

Constance saw that this marvellous tranquillity must be imitated, and she imitated it very well. It was a "Baines" tranquillity. But she noticed a twitching of her sister's lips. The twitching comforted Constance, proving to her that she was not alone in foolishness. There was also something queer about the permanent lines of Sophia's mouth. That must be due to the "attack" about which Sophia had written.

"Did Cyril meet you?" asked Constance. It was all that she could think of to say.

"Oh yes!" said Sophia, eagerly. "And I went to his studio, and he saw me off at Euston. He is a *very* nice boy. I love him."

She said "I love him" with the intonation of Sophia aged fifteen. Her tone and imperious gestures sent Constance flying back to the 'sixties. "She hasn't altered one bit," Constance thought with joy. "Nothing could change Sophia." And at the back of that notion was a more general notion: "Nothing could change a Baines." It was true that Constance's Sophia had not changed. Powerful individualities remain undisfigured by no matter what vicissitudes. After this revelation of the original Sophia, arising as it did out of praise of Cyril, Constance felt easier, felt reassured.

"This is Fossette," said Sophia, pulling at the chain.

Constance knew not what to reply. Surely Sophia could not be aware what she did in bringing such a dog to a place where people were so particular as they are in the Five Towns.

"Fossette!" She repeated the name in an endearing accent, half stooping towards the dog. After all, it was not the dog's fault. Sophia had certainly mentioned a dog in her letters, but she had not prepared Constance for the spectacle of Fossette.

All that happened in a moment. A porter appeared with two trunks belonging to Sophia. Constance observed that they were superlatively "good" trunks; also that Sophia's clothes, though "on the showy side," were superlatively "good." The getting of Sophia's ticket to Bursley occupied them next, and soon the first shock of meeting had worn off.

In a second-class compartment of the Loop Line train, with Sophia and Fossette opposite to her, Constance had leisure to "take in" Sophia. She came to the conclusion that, despite her slenderness and straightness and the general effect of the long oval of her face under the hat, Sophia looked her age. She saw that Sophia must have been through a great deal; her experiences were damagingly printed in the details of feature. Seen at a distance, she might have passed for a woman of thirty, even for a girl, but seen across a narrow railway carriage she was a woman whom suffering had aged. Yet obviously her spirit was unbroken. Hear her tell a doubtful porter that of course she should take Fossette with her into the carriage! See her shut the carriage door with the expressed intention of keeping other people out! She was accustomed to command. At the same time her face had an almost set smile, as though she had said to herself: "I will die smiling." Constance felt sorry for her. While recognizing in Sophia a superior in charm, in experience, in knowledge of the world and in force of personality, she yet with a kind of undisturbed, fundamental superiority felt sorry for Sophia.

"What do you think?" said Sophia, absently fingering Fossette. "A man came up to me at Euston, while Cyril was getting my ticket, and said, 'Eh, Miss Baines, I haven't seen ye for over thirty years, but I know you're Miss Baines, or *were*—and you're looking bonny.' Then he went off. I think it must have been Holl, the grocer."

"Had he got a long white beard?"

"Yes."

"Then it was Mr Holl. He's been Mayor twice. He's an alderman, you know."

"Really!" said Sophia. "But wasn't it queer?"

"Eh! Bless us!" exclaimed Constance. "Don't talk about queer! It's terrible how time flies."

The conversation stopped, and it refused to start again. Two women who are full of affectionate curiosity about each other, and who have not seen each other for thirty years, and who are anxious to confide in each other, ought to discover no difficulty in talking; but somehow these two could not talk. Constance perceived that Sophia was impeded by the same awkwardness as herself.

"Well I never!" cried Sophia, suddenly. She had glanced out of the window and had seen two camels and an elephant in a field close to the line, amid manufactories and warehouses and advertisements of soap.

"Oh!" said Constance. "That's Barnum's, you know. They have what they called a central depôt here, because it's the middle of England." Constance spoke proudly. (After all, there can be only one middle.) It was on her tongue to say, in her "tart" manner, that Fossette ought to be with the camels, but she refrained. Sophia hit on the excellent idea of noting all the buildings that were new to her and all the landmarks that she remembered. It was surprising how little the district had altered.

"Same smoke!" said Sophia.

"Same smoke!" Constance agreed.

"It's even worse," said Sophia.

"Do you think so?" Constance was slightly piqued. "But they're doing something now for smoke abatement."

"I must have forgotten how dirty it was!" said Sophia. "I suppose that's it. I'd no *idea* . . . !"

"Really!" said Constance. Then, in candid admission, "The fact is, it *is* dirty. You can't imagine what work it makes, especially with window-curtains."

As the train puffed under Trafalgar Road, Constance pointed to a new station that was being built there, to be called "Trafalgar Road" station.

"Won't it be strange?" said she, accustomed to the eternal sequence of Loop Line stations—Turnhill, Bursley, Bleakridge, Hanbridge, Cauldon, Knype, Trent Vale, and Longshaw. A "Trafalgar Road" inserting itself between Bleakridge and Hanbridge seemed to her exclusively curious.

“Yes, I suppose it will,” Sophia agreed.

“But of course it’s not the same to you,” said Constance, dashed. She indicated the glories of Bursley Park, as the train slackened for Bursley, with modesty. Sophia gazed, and vaguely recognized the slopes where she had taken her first walk with Gerald Scales.

Nobody accosted them at Bursley Station, and they drove to the Square in a cab. Amy was at the window; she held up Spot, who was in a plenary state of cleanliness, rivalling the purity of Amy’s apron.

“Good afternoon, m’m,” said Amy, officiously, to Sophia, as Sophia came up the steps.

“Good afternoon, Amy,” Sophia replied. She flattered Amy in thus showing that she was acquainted with her name; but if ever a servant was put into her place by mere tone, Amy was put into her place on that occasion. Constance trembled at Sophia’s frigid and arrogant politeness. Certainly Sophia was not used to being addressed first by servants. But Amy was not quite the ordinary servant. She was much older than the ordinary servant, and she had acquired a partial moral dominion over Constance, though Constance would have warmly denied it. Hence Constance’s apprehension. However, nothing happened. Amy apparently did not feel the snub.

“Take Spot and put him in Mr Cyril’s bedroom,” Constance murmured to her, as if implying: “Have I not already told you to do that?” The fact was, she was afraid for Spot’s life.

“Now, Fossette!” She welcomed the incoming poodle kindly; the poodle began at once to sniff.

The fat, red cabman was handling the trunks on the pavement, and Amy was upstairs. For a moment the sisters were alone together in the parlour.

“So here I am!” exclaimed the tall, majestic woman of fifty. And her lips twitched again as she looked round the room—so small to her.

“Yes, here you are!” Constance agreed. She bit her lip, and, as a measure of prudence to avoid breaking down, she bustled out to the cabman. A passing instant of emotion, like a fleck of foam on a wide and calm sea!

The cabman blundered up and downstairs with trunks, and saluted Sophia’s haughty generosity, and then there was quietness. Amy was already brewing the tea in the cave. The prepared tea-table in front of the fire made a glittering array.

“Now, what about Fossette?” Constance voiced anxieties that had been growing on her.

“Fossette will be quite all right with me,” said Sophia, firmly.

They ascended to the guest’s room, which drew Sophia’s admiration for its prettiness. She hurried to the window and looked out into the Square.

“Would you like a fire?” Constance asked, in a rather perfunctory manner. For a bedroom fire, in seasons of normal health, was still regarded as absurd in the Square.

“Oh, no!” said Sophia; but with a slight failure to rebut the suggestion as utterly ridiculous.

“Sure?” Constance questioned.

“Quite, thank you,” said Sophia.

“Well, I’ll leave you. I expect Amy will have tea ready directly.” She went down into the kitchen. “Amy,” she said, “as soon as we’ve finished tea, light a fire in Mrs Scales’s bedroom.”

“In the top bedroom, m’m?”

“Yes.”

Constance climbed again to her own bedroom, and shut the door. She needed a moment to herself, in the midst of this terrific affair. She sighed with relief as she removed her mantle. She thought: “At any rate we’ve met, and I’ve got her here. She’s very nice. No, she isn’t a bit altered.” She hesitated to admit that to her Sophia was the least in the world formidable. And so she said once more: “She’s very nice. She isn’t a bit altered.” And then: “Fancy her being here! She really is here.” With her perfect simplicity it did not occur to Constance to speculate as to what Sophia thought of her.

Sophia was downstairs first, and Constance found her looking at the blank wall beyond the door leading to the kitchen steps.

“So this is where you had it bricked up?” said Sophia.

“Yes,” said Constance. “That’s the place.”

“It makes me feel like people feel when they have tickling in a limb that’s been cut off!” said Sophia.

“Oh, Sophia!”

The tea received a great deal of praise from Sophia, but neither of them ate much. Constance found that Sophia was like herself: she had to be particular about her food. She tasted dainties for the sake of tasting, but it was a bird’s pecking. Not the twelfth part of the tea was consumed. They dared not indulge caprices. Only their eyes could feed.

After tea they went up to the drawing-room, and in the corridor had the startling pleasure of seeing two dogs who scurried about after each other in amity. Spot had found Fossette, with the aid of Amy’s incurable carelessness, and had at once examined her with great particularity. She seemed to be of an amiable disposition, and not averse from the lighter distractions. For a long time the sisters sat chatting together in the lit drawing-room to the agreeable sound of happy dogs playing in the dark corridor. Those dogs saved the situation, because they needed constant attention. When the dogs dozed, the sisters began to look through the

photograph albums, of which Constance had several, bound in plush or morocco. Nothing will sharpen the memory, evoke the past, raise the dead, rejuvenate the ageing, and cause both sighs and smiles, like a collection of photographs gathered together during long years of life. Constance had an astonishing menagerie of unknown cousins and their connexions, and of townspeople; she had Cyril at all ages; she had weird daguerreotypes of her parents and their parents. The strangest of all was a portrait of Samuel Povey as an infant in arms. Sophia checked an impulse to laugh at it. But when Constance said: "Isn't it funny?" she did allow herself to laugh. A photograph of Samuel in the year before his death was really imposing. Sophia stared at it impressed. It was the portrait of an honest man.

"How long have you been a widow?" Constance asked in a low voice, glancing at upright Sophia over her spectacles, a leaf of the album raised against her finger.

Sophia unmistakably flushed. "I don't know that I am a widow," said she, with an air. "My husband left me in 1870, and I've never seen nor heard of him since."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Constance, alarmed and deafened as by a clap of awful thunder. "I thought ye were a widow. Mr Peel-Swynnerton said he was told positively ye were a widow. That's why I never . . ." She stopped. Her face was troubled.

"Of course I always passed for a widow, over there," said Sophia.

"Of course," said Constance quickly. "I see . . ."

"And I may be a widow," said Sophia.

Constance made no remark. This was a blow. Bursley was such a particular place. Doubtless, Gerald Scales had behaved like a Scoundrel. That was sure!

When, immediately afterwards, Amy opened the drawing-room door (having first knocked—the practice of encouraging a servant to plunge without warning of any kind into a drawing-room had never been favoured in that house) she saw the sisters sitting rather near to each other at the walnut oval table, Mrs Scales very upright, and staring into the fire, and Mrs Povey "bunched up" and staring at the photograph album; but seeming to Amy aged and apprehensive; Mrs Povey's hair was quite grey, though Mrs Scales's hair was nearly as black as Amy's own. Mrs Scales started at the sound of the knock, and turned her head.

"Here's Mr and Mrs Critchlow, m'm," announced Amy.

The sisters glanced at one another, with lifted foreheads. Then Mrs Povey spoke to Amy as though visits at half-past eight at night were a customary phenomenon of the household. Nevertheless, she trembled to think what outrageous thing Mr Critchlow might say to Sophia after thirty years' absence. The occasion was great, and it might also be terrible.

"Ask them to come up," she said calmly.

But Amy had the best of that encounter. "I have done," she replied, and instantly produced them out of the darkness of the corridor. It was providential: the sisters had made no remark that the Critchlows might not hear.

Then Maria Critchlow, simpering, had to greet Sophia. Mrs Critchlow was very agitated, from sheer nervousness. She curvetted; she almost pranced; and she made noises with her mouth as though she saw someone eating a sour apple. She wanted to show Sophia how greatly she had changed from the young, timid apprentice. Certainly since her marriage she had changed. As manager of other people's business she had not felt the necessity of being effusive to customers, but as proprietress, anxiety to succeed had dragged her out of her capable and mechanical indifference. It was a pity. Her consistent dullness had had a sort of dignity; but genial, she was merely ridiculous. Animation cruelly displayed her appalling commonness and physical shabbiness. Sophia's demeanour was not chilly; but it indicated that Sophia had no wish to be eyed over as a freak of nature.

Mr Critchlow advanced very slowly into the room. "Ye still carry your head on a stiff neck," said he, deliberately examining Sophia. Then with great care he put out his long thin arm and took her hand. "Well, I'm rare and glad to see ye!"

Everyone was thunderstruck at this expression of joy. Mr Critchlow had never been known to be glad to see anybody.

"Yes," twittered Maria, "Mr Critchlow would come in tonight. Nothing would do but he must come in tonight."

"You didn't tell me this afternoon," said Constance, "that you were going to give us the pleasure of your company like this."

He looked momentarily at Constance. "No," he grated, "I don't know as I did."

His gaze flattered Sophia. Evidently he treated this experienced and sad woman of fifty as a young girl. And in presence of his extreme age she felt like a young girl, remembering the while how as a young girl she had hated him. Repulsing the assistance of his wife, he arranged an armchair in front of the fire and meticulously put himself into it. Assuredly he was much older in a drawing-room than behind the counter of his shop. Constance had noticed that in the afternoon. A live coal fell out of the fire. He bent forward, wet his fingers, picked up the coal and threw it back into the fire.

"Well," said Sophia, "I wouldn't have done that."

"I never saw Mr Critchlow's equal for picking up hot cinders," Maria giggled.

Mr Critchlow deigned no remark. “When did ye leave this Paris?” he demanded of Sophia, leaning back, and putting his hands on the arms of the chair.

“Yesterday morning,” said Sophia.

“And what’n ye been doing with yeself since yesterday morning?”

“I spent last night in London,” Sophia replied.

“Oh, in London, did ye?”

“Yes. Cyril and I had an evening together.”

“Eh? Cyril! What’s yer opinion o’ Cyril, Sophia?”

“I’m very proud to have Cyril for a nephew,” said Sophia.

“Oh! Are ye?” The old man was obviously ironic.

“Yes I am,” Sophia insisted sharply. “I’m not going to hear a word said against Cyril.”

She proceeded to an enthusiastic laudation of Cyril which rather overwhelmed his mother. Constance was pleased; she was delighted. And yet somewhere in her mind was an uncomfortable feeling that Cyril, having taken a fancy to his brilliant aunt, had tried to charm her as he seldom or never tried to charm his mother. Cyril and Sophia had dazzled and conquered each other; they were of the same type; whereas she, Constance, being but a plain person, could not glitter.

She rang the bell and gave instructions to Amy about food—fruit cakes, coffee and hot milk, on a tray; and Sophia also spoke to Amy, murmuring a request as to Fossette.

“Yes, Mrs Scales,” said Amy, with eager deference.

Mrs Critchlow smiled vaguely from a low chair near the curtained window. Then Constance lit another burner of the chandelier. In doing so, she gave a little sigh; it was a sigh of relief. Mr Critchlow had behaved himself. Now that he and Sophia had met, the worst was over. Had Constance known beforehand that he would pay a call, she would have been agonized by apprehensions, but now that he had actually come she was glad he had come.

When he had silently sipped some hot milk, he drew a thick bunch of papers, white and blue, from his bulging breast-pocket.

“Now, Maria Critchlow,” he called, edging round his chair slightly. “Ye’d best go back home.”

Maria Critchlow was biting a bit of walnut cake, while in her right hand, all seamed with black lines, she held a cup of coffee.

“But, Mr Critchlow—” Constance protested.

“I’ve got business with Sophia, and I must get it done. I’ve got for to render an account of my stewardship to Sophia, under her father’s will, and her mother’s will, and her aunt’s will, and it’s nobody’s business but mine and Sophia’s, I reckon. Now then,” he glanced at his wife, “off with ye!”

Maria rose, half-kittenish and half-ashamed.

“Surely you don’t want to go into all that tonight,” said Sophia. She spoke softly, for she had already fully perceived that Mr Critchlow must be managed with the tact which the capricious obstinacies of advanced age demanded. “Surely you can wait a day or two. I’m in no hurry.”

“*Haven’t I waited long enough*?” he retorted fiercely.

There was a pause. Maria Critchlow moved.

“As for you being in no hurry, Sophia,” the old man went on, “nobody can say as *you’ve* been in a hurry.”

Sophia had suffered a check. She glanced hesitatingly at Constance.

“Mrs Critchlow and I will go down into the parlour,” said Constance, quickly. “There’s a bit of fire there.”

“Oh no. I won’t hear of such a thing!”

“Yes, we will, won’t we, Mrs Critchlow?” Constance insisted, cheerfully but firmly. She was determined that in her house Sophia should have all the freedom and conveniences that she could have had in her own. If a private room was needed for discussions between Sophia and her trustee, Constance’s pride was piqued to supply that room. Further, Constance was glad to get Maria out of Sophia’s sight. She was accustomed to Maria; with her it did not matter; but she did not care that the teeth of Sophia should be set on edge by the ridiculous demeanour of Maria. So those two left the drawing-room, and the old man began to open the papers which he had been preparing for weeks.

There was very little fire in the parlour, and Constance, in addition to being bored by Mrs Critchlow’s inane and inquisitive remarks, felt chilly, which was bad for her sciatica. She wondered whether Sophia would have to confess to Mr Critchlow that she was not certainly a widow. She thought that steps ought to be taken to ascertain, through Birkinshaws, if anything was known of Gerald Scales. But even that course was set with perils. Supposing that he still lived, an unspeakable villain (Constance could only think of him as an unspeakable villain), and supposing that he molested Sophia,—what scenes! What shame in the town! Such frightful thoughts ran endlessly through Constance’s mind as she bent over the fire endeavouring to keep alive a silly conversation with Maria Critchlow.

Amy passed through the parlour to go to bed. There was no other way of reaching the upper part of the house.

“Are you going to bed, Amy?”

“Yes’m.”

"Where is Fossette?"

"In the kitchen, m'm," said Amy, defending herself. "Mrs Scales told me the dog might sleep in the kitchen with Spot, as they were such good friends. I've opened the bottom drawer, and Fossit is lying in that."

"Mrs Scales has brought a dog with her!" exclaimed Maria.

"Yes'm!" said Amy, dryly, before Constance could answer. She implied everything in that affirmative.

"You *are* a family for dogs," said Maria. "What sort of dog is it?"

"Well," said Constance, "I don't know exactly what they call it. It's a French dog, one of those French dogs." Amy was lingering at the stairfoot, "Good night, Amy, thank you."

Amy ascended, shutting the door.

"Oh! I see!" Maria muttered. "Well, I never!"

It was ten o'clock before sounds above indicated that the first interview between trustee and beneficiary was finished.

"I'll be going on to open our side-door," said Maria. "Say good night to Mrs Scales for me." She was not sure whether Charles Critchlow had really meant her to go home, or whether her mere absence from the drawing-room had contented him. So she departed. He came down the stairs with the most tiresome slowness, went through the parlour in silence, ignoring Constance, and also Sophia, who was at his heels, and vanished.

As Constance shut and bolted the front-door, the sisters looked at each other, Sophia faintly smiling. It seemed to them that they understood each other better when they did not speak. With a glance, they exchanged their ideas on the subject of Charles Critchlow and Maria, and learnt that their ideas were similar. Constance said nothing as to the private interview. Nor did Sophia. At present, on this the first day, they could only achieve intimacy by intermittent flashes.

"What about bed?" asked Sophia.

"You must be tired," said Constance.

Sophia got to the stairs, which received a little light from the corridor gas, before Constance, having tested the window-fastening, turned out the gas in the parlour. They climbed the lower flight of stairs together.

"I must see that your room is all right," Constance said.

"Must you?" Sophia smiled.

They climbed the second flight, slowly. Constance was out of breath.

"Oh, a fire! How nice!" cried Sophia. "But why did you go to all that trouble? I told you not to."

"It's no trouble at all," said Constance, raising the gas in the bedroom. Her tone implied that bedroom fires were a quite ordinary incident of daily life in a place like Bursley.

"Well, my dear, I hope you'll find everything comfortable," said Constance.

"I'm sure I shall. Good night, dear."

"Good night, then."

They looked at each other again, with timid affectionateness. They did not kiss. The thought in both their minds was: "We couldn't keep on kissing every day." But there was a vast amount of quiet restrained affection, of mutual confidence and respect, even of tenderness, in their tones.

About half an hour later a dreadful hullabaloo smote the ear of Constance. She was just getting into bed. She listened intently, in great alarm. It was undoubtedly those dogs fighting, and fighting to the death. She pictured the kitchen as a battlefield, and Spot slain. Opening the door, she stepped out into the corridor.

"Constance," said a low voice above her. She jumped. "Is that you?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't bother to go down to the dogs; they'll stop in a moment. Fossette won't bite. I'm so sorry she's upsetting the house."

Constance stared upwards, and discerned a pale shadow. The dogs did soon cease their altercation. This short colloquy in the dark affected Constance strangely.

III

The next morning, after a night varied by periods of wakefulness not unpleasant, Sophia rose and, taking due precautions against cold, went to the window. It was Saturday; she had left Paris on the Thursday. She looked forth upon the Square, holding aside the blind. She had expected, of course, to find that the Square had shrunk in size; but nevertheless she was startled to see how small it was. It seemed to her scarcely bigger than a courtyard. She could remember a winter morning when from the window she had watched the Square under virgin snow in the lamplight, and the Square had been vast, and the first way-farer, crossing it diagonally and leaving behind him the irregular impress of his feet, had appeared to travel for hours over an interminable white waste before vanishing past Holl's shop in the direction of the Town Hall. She chiefly recalled the Square under snow; cold mornings, and the coldness of the oil-cloth at the window, and the draught of cold air through the ill-fitting sash (it was put right now)! These visions of herself seemed beautiful to her, her childish existence seemed beautiful; the storms and tempests of her girlhood seemed beautiful; even the great sterile expanse of tedium when, after giving up a scholastic career, she had served for two years in the shop—even this had a strange charm in her memory.

And she thought that not for millions of pounds would she live her life over again.

In its contents the Square had not surprisingly changed during the immense, the terrifying interval that separated her from her virginity. On the east side, several shops had been thrown into one, and forced into a semblance of eternal unity by means of a coat of stucco. And there was a fountain at the north end which was new to her. No other constructional change! But the moral change, the sad declension from the ancient proud spirit of the Square—this was painfully depressing. Several establishments lacked tenants, had obviously lacked tenants for a long time; "To let" notices hung in their stained and dirty upper windows, and clung insecurely to their closed shutters. And on the signboards of these establishments were names that Sophia did not know. The character of most of the shops seemed to have worsened; they had become pettifogging little holes, unkempt, shabby, poor; they had no brightness, no feeling of vitality. And the floor of the Square was littered with nondescript refuse. The whole scene, paltry, confined, and dull, reached for her the extreme of provinciality. It was what the French called, with a pregnant intonation, *la province*. This being said, there was nothing else to say. Bursley, of course, was in the provinces; Bursley must, in the nature of things, be typically provincial. But in her mind it had always been differentiated from the common *province;* it had always had an air, a distinction, and especially St Luke's Square! That illusion was now gone. Still, the alteration was not wholly in herself, it was not wholly subjective. The Square really had changed for the worse; it might not be smaller, but it had deteriorated. As a centre of commerce it had assuredly approached very near to death. On a Saturday morning thirty years ago it would have been covered with linen-roofed stalls, and chattering countryfolk, and the stir of bargains. Now, Saturday morning was like any other morning in the Square, and the glass-roof of St Luke's market in Wedgwood Street, which she could see from her window, echoed to the sounds of noisy commerce. In that instance business had simply moved a few yards to the east; but Sophia knew, from hints in Constance's letters and in her talk, that business in general had moved more than a few yards, it had moved a couple of miles—to arrogant and pushing Hanbridge, with its electric light and its theatres and its big, advertising shops. The heaven of thick smoke over the Square, the black deposit on painted woodwork, the intermittent hooting of steam sirens, showed that the wholesale trade of Bursley still flourished. But Sophia had no memories of the wholesale trade of Bursley; it meant nothing to the youth of her heart; she was attached by intimate links to the retail traffic of Bursley, and as a mart old Bursley was done for.

She thought: "It would kill me if I had to live here. It's deadening. It weighs on you. And the dirt, and the horrible ugliness! And the way they talk, and the way they think! I felt it first at Knype station. The Square is rather picturesque, but it's such a poor, poor little thing! Fancy having to look at it every morning of one's life! No!" She almost shuddered.

For the time being she had no home. To Constance she was "paying a visit."

Constance did not appear to realize the awful conditions of dirt, decay, and provinciality in which she was living. Even Constance's house was extremely inconvenient, dark, and no doubt unhealthy. Cellar-kitchen, no hall, abominable stairs, and as to hygiene, simply medieval. She could not understand why Constance had remained in the house. Constance had plenty of money, and might live where she liked, and in a good modern house. Yet she stayed in the Square. "I dare say she's got used to it," Sophia thought leniently. "I dare say I should be just the same in her place." But she did not really think so, and she could not understand Constance's state of mind.

Certainly she could not claim to have "added up" Constance yet. She considered that her sister was in some respects utterly provincial—what they used to call in the Five Towns a "body." Somewhat too diffident, not assertive enough, not erect enough; with curious provincial pronunciations, accents, gestures, mannerisms, and inarticulate ejaculations; with a curious narrowness of outlook! But at the same time Constance was very shrewd, and she was often proving by some bit of a remark that she knew what was what, despite her provinciality. In judgements upon human nature they undoubtedly thought alike, and there was a strong natural general sympathy between them. And at the bottom of Constance was something fine. At intervals Sophia discovered herself secretly patronizing Constance, but reflection would always cause her to cease from patronage and to examine her own defences. Constance, besides being the essence of kindness, was no fool. Constance could see through a pretence, an absurdity, as quickly as anyone. Constance did honestly appear to Sophia to be superior to any French-woman that she had ever encountered. She saw supreme in Constance that quality which she had recognized in the porters at Newhaven on landing—the quality of an honest and naïve goodwill, of powerful simplicity. That quality presented itself to her as the greatest in the world, and it seemed to be in the very air of England. She could even detect it in Mr Critchlow, whom, for the rest, she liked, admiring the brutal force of his character. She pardoned his brutality to his wife. She found it proper. "After all," she said, "supposing he hadn't married her, what would she have been? Nothing but a slave! She's infinitely better off as his wife. In fact she's lucky. And it would be absurd for him to treat her otherwise than he does treat her." (Sophia did not divine that her masterful Critchlow had once wanted Maria as one might want a star.)

But to be always with such people! To be always with Constance! To be always in the Bursley atmosphere, physical and mental!

She pictured Paris as it would be on that very morning—bright, clean, glittering; the neatness of the Rue

Lord Byron, and the magnificent slanting splendour of the Champs Elysées. Paris had always seemed beautiful to her; but the life of Paris had not seemed beautiful to her. Yet now it did seem beautiful. She could delve down into the earlier years of her ownership of the Pension, and see a regular, placid beauty in her daily life there. Her life there, even so late as a fortnight ago, seemed beautiful; sad, but beautiful. It had passed into history. She sighed when she thought of the innumerable interviews with Mardon, the endless formalities required by the English and the French law and by the particularity of the Syndicate. She had been through all that. She had actually been through it and it was over. She had bought the Pension for a song and sold it for great riches. She had developed from a nobody into the desired of Syndicates. And after long, long, monotonous, strenuous years of possession the day had come, the emotional moment had come, when she had yielded up the keys of ownership to Mr Mardon and a man from the Hotel Moscow, and had paid her servants for the last time and signed the last receipted bill. The men had been very gallant, and had requested her to stay in the Pension as their guest until she was ready to leave Paris. But she had declined that. She could not have borne to remain in the Pension under the reign of another. She had left at once and gone to a hotel with her few goods while finally disposing of certain financial questions. And one evening Jacqueline had come to see her, and had wept.

Her exit from the Pension Frensham struck her now as poignantly pathetic, in its quickness and its absence of ceremonial. Ten steps, and her career was finished, closed. Astonishing, with what liquid tenderness she turned and looked back on that hard, fighting, exhausting life in Paris! For, even if she had unconsciously liked it, she had never enjoyed it. She had always compared France disadvantageously with England, always resented the French temperament in business, always been convinced that “you never knew where you were” with French tradespeople. And now they flitted before her endowed with a wondrous charm; so polite in their lying, so eager to spare your feelings and to reassure you, so neat and prim. And the French shops, so exquisitely arranged! Even a butcher’s shop in Paris was a pleasure to the eye, whereas the butcher’s shop in Wedgwood Street, which she remembered of old, and which she had glimpsed from the cab—what a bloody shambles! She longed for Paris again. She longed to stretch her lungs in Paris. These people in Bursley did not suspect what Paris was. They did not appreciate and they never would appreciate the marvels that she had accomplished in a theatre of marvels. They probably never realized that the whole of the rest of the world was not more or less like Bursley. They had no curiosity. Even Constance was a thousand times more interested in relating trifles of Bursley gossip than in listening to details of life in Paris. Occasionally she had expressed a mild, vapid surprise at things told to her by Sophia; but she was not really impressed, because her curiosity did not extend beyond Bursley. She, like the rest, had the formidable, thrice-callous egotism of the provinces. And if Sophia had informed her that the heads of Parisians grew out of their navels she would have murmured: “Well, well! Bless us! I never heard of such things! Mrs Brindley’s second boy has got his head quite crooked, poor little fellow!”

Why should Sophia feel sorrowful? She did not know. She was free; free to go where she liked and do what she liked. She had no responsibilities, no cares. The thought of her husband had long ago ceased to rouse in her any feeling of any kind. She was rich. Mr Critchlow had accumulated for her about as much money as she had herself acquired. Never could she spend her income! She did not know how to spend it. She lacked nothing that was procurable. She had no desires except the direct desire for happiness. If thirty thousand pounds or so could have bought a son like Cyril, she would have bought one for herself. She bitterly regretted that she had no child. In this she envied Constance. A child seemed to be the one commodity worth having. She was too free, too exempt from responsibilities. In spite of Constance she was alone in the world. The strangeness of the hazards of life overwhelmed her. Here she was at fifty, alone.

But the idea of leaving Constance, having once rejoined her, did not please Sophia. It disquieted her. She could not see herself living away from Constance. She was alone—but Constance was there.

She was downstairs first, and she had a little conversation with Amy. And she stood on the step of the front door while Fossette made a preliminary inspection of Spot’s gutter. She found the air nipping.

Constance, when she descended, saw stretching across one side of the breakfast table an umbrella, Sophia’s present to her from Paris. It was an umbrella such that a better could not be bought. It would have impressed even Aunt Harriet. The handle was of gold, set with a circlet of opalines. The tips of the ribs were also of gold. It was this detail which staggered Constance. Frankly, this development of luxury had been unknown and unsuspected in the Square. That the tips of the ribs should match the handle . . . that did truly beat everything! Sophia said calmly that the device was quite common. But she did not conceal that the umbrella was strictly of the highest class and that it might be shown to queens without shame. She intimated that the frame (a “Fox’s Paragon”), handle, and tips, would outlast many silks. Constance was childish with pleasure.

They decided to go out marketing together. The unspoken thought in their minds was that as Sophia would have to be introduced to the town sooner or later, it might as well be sooner.

Constance looked at the sky. “It can’t possibly rain,” she said. “I shall take my umbrella.”

CHAPTER III

I

Sophia wore list slippers in the morning. It was a habit which she had formed in the Rue Lord Byron—by accident rather than with an intention to utilize list slippers for the effective supervision of servants. These list slippers were the immediate cause of important happenings in St Luke's Square. Sophia had been with Constance one calendar month—it was, of course, astonishing how quickly the time had passed!—and she had become familiar with the house. Restraint had gradually ceased to mark the relations of the sisters. Constance, in particular, hid nothing from Sophia, who was made aware of the minor and major defects of Amy and all the other creakings of the household machine. Meals were eaten off the ordinary table-cloths, and on the days for "turning out" the parlour, Constance assumed, with a little laugh, that Sophia would excuse Amy's apron, which she had not had time to change. In brief, Sophia was no longer a stranger, and nobody felt bound to pretend that things were not exactly what they were. In spite of the foulness and the provinciality of Bursley, Sophia enjoyed the intimacy with Constance. As for Constance, she was enchanted. The inflections of their voices, when they were talking to each other very privately, were often tender, and these sudden surprising tenderness secretly thrilled both of them.

On the fourth Sunday morning Sophia put on her dressing-gown and those list slippers very early, and paid a visit to Constance's bedroom. She was somewhat concerned about Constance, and her concern was pleasurable to her. She made the most of it. Amy, with her lifelong carelessness about doors, had criminally failed to latch the street door of the parlour on the previous morning, and Constance had only perceived the omission by the phenomenon of frigidity in her legs at breakfast. She always sat with her back to the door, in her mother's fluted rocking-chair; and Sophia on the spot, but not in the chair, occupied by John Baines in the forties, and in the seventies and later by Samuel Povey. Constance had been alarmed by that frigidity. "I shall have a return of my sciatica!" she had exclaimed, and Sophia was startled by the apprehension in her tone. Before evening the sciatica had indeed revisited Constance's sciatic nerve, and Sophia for the first time gained an idea of what a pulsating sciatica can do in the way of torturing its victim. Constance, in addition to the sciatica, had caught a sneezing cold, and the act of sneezing caused her the most acute pain. Sophia had soon stopped the sneezing. Constance was got to bed. Sophia wished to summon a doctor, but Constance assured her that the doctor would have nothing new to advise. Constance suffered angelically. The weak and exquisite sweetness of her smile, as she lay in bed under the stress of twinging pain amid hot-water bottles, was amazing to Sophia. It made her think upon the reserves of Constance's character, and upon the variety of the manifestations of the Baines blood.

So on the Sunday morning she had risen early, just after Amy.

She discovered Constance to be a little better, as regards the neuralgia, but exhausted by the torments of a sleepless night. Sophia, though she had herself not slept well, felt somehow conscience-stricken for having slept at all.

"You poor dear!" she murmured, brimming with sympathy. "I shall make you some tea at once, myself."

"Oh, Amy will do it," said Constance.

Sophia repeated with a resolute intonation: "I shall make it myself." And after being satisfied that there was no instant need for a renewal of hot-water bottles, she went further downstairs in those list slippers.

As she was descending the dark kitchen steps she heard Amy's voice in pettish exclamation: "Oh, get out, *you*!" followed by a yelp from Fossette. She had a swift movement of anger, which she controlled. The relations between her and Fossette were not marked by transports, and her rules over dogs in general were severe; even when alone she very seldom kissed the animal passionately, according to the general habit of people owning dogs. But she loved Fossette. And, moreover, her love for Fossette had been lately sharpened by the ridicule which Bursley had showered upon that strange beast. Happily for Sophia's *amour propre*, there was no means of getting Fossette shaved in Bursley, and thus Fossette was daily growing less comic to the Bursley eye. Sophia could therefore without loss of dignity yield to force of circumstances what she would not have yielded to popular opinion. She guessed that Amy had no liking for the dog, but the accent which Amy had put upon the "*you*" seemed to indicate that Amy was making distinctions between Fossette and Spot, and this disturbed Sophia much more than Fossette's yelps.

Sophia coughed, and entered the kitchen.

Spot was lapping his morning milk out of a saucer, while Fossette stood wistfully, an amorphous mass of thick hair, under the table.

“Good morning, Amy,” said Sophia, with dreadful politeness.

“Good morning, m’m,” said Amy, glumly.

Amy knew that Sophia had heard that yelp, and Sophia knew that she knew. The pretence of politeness was horrible. Both the women felt as though the kitchen was sanded with gunpowder and there were lighted matches about. Sophia had a very proper grievance against Amy on account of the open door of the previous day. Sophia thought that, after such a sin, the least Amy could do was to show contrition and amiability and an anxiety to please: which things Amy had not shown. Amy had a grievance against Sophia because Sophia had recently thrust upon her a fresh method of cooking green vegetables. Amy was a strong opponent of new or foreign methods. Sophia was not aware of this grievance, for Amy had hidden it under her customary cringing politeness to Sophia.

They surveyed each other like opposing armies.

“What a pity you have no gas stove here! I want to make some tea at once for Mrs Povey,” said Sophia, inspecting the just-born fire.

“Gas stove, m’m?” said Amy, hostilely. It was Sophia’s list slippers which had finally decided Amy to drop the mask of deference.

She made no effort to aid Sophia; she gave no indication as to where the various necessaries for tea were to be found. Sophia got the kettle, and washed it out. Sophia got the smallest tea-pot, and, as the tea-leaves had been left in it, she washed out the tea-pot also, with exaggerated noise and meticulousness. Sophia got the sugar and the other trifles, and Sophia blew up the fire with the bellows. And Amy did nothing in particular except encourage Spot to drink.

“Is that all the milk you give to Fossette?” Sophia demanded coldly, when it had come to Fossette’s turn. She was waiting for the water to boil. The saucer for the bigger dog, who would have made two of Spot, was not half full.

“It’s all there is to spare, m’m,” Amy rasped.

Sophia made no reply. Soon afterwards she departed, with the tea successfully made. If Amy had not been a mature woman of over forty she would have snorted as Sophia went away. But Amy was scarcely the ordinary silly girl.

Save for a certain primness as she offered the tray to her sister, Sophia’s demeanour gave no sign whatever that the Amazon in her was aroused. Constance’s eager trembling pleasure in the tea touched her deeply, and she was exceedingly thankful that Constance had her, Sophia, as a succour in time of distress.

A few minutes later, Constance, having first asked Sophia what time it was by the watch in the watch-case on the chest of drawers (the Swiss clock had long since ceased to work), pulled the red tassel of bell-cord over her bed. A bell tinkled far away in the kitchen.

“Anything I can do?” Sophia inquired.

“Oh no, thanks,” said Constance. “I only want my letters, if the postman has come. He ought to have been here long ago.”

Sophia had learned during her stay that Sunday morning was the morning on which Constance expected a letter from Cyril. It was a definite arrangement between mother and son that Cyril should write on Saturdays, and Constance on Sundays. Sophia knew that Constance set store by this letter, becoming more and more preoccupied about Cyril as the end of the week approached. Since Sophia’s arrival Cyril’s letter had not failed to come, but once it had been naught save a scribbled line or two, and Sophia gathered that it was never a certainty, and that Constance was accustomed, though not reconciled, to disappointments. Sophia had been allowed to read the letters. They left a faint impression on her mind that her favourite was perhaps somewhat negligent in his relations with his mother.

There was no reply to the bell. Constance rang again without effect.

With a brusque movement Sophia left the bedroom by way of Cyril’s room.

“Amy,” she called over the banisters, “do you not hear your mistress’s bell?”

“I’m coming as quick as I can, m’m.” The voice was still very glum.

Sophia murmured something inarticulate, staying till assured that Amy really was coming, and then she passed back into Cyril’s bedroom. She waited there, hesitant, not exactly on the watch, not exactly unwilling to assist at an interview between Amy and Amy’s mistress; indeed, she could not have surely analysed her motive for remaining in Cyril’s bedroom, with the door ajar between that room and Constance’s.

Amy reluctantly mounted the stairs and went into her mistress’s bedroom with her chin in the air. She thought that Sophia had gone up to the second storey, where she “belonged.” She stood in silence by the bed, showing no sympathy with Constance, no curiosity as to the indisposition. She objected to Constance’s attack of sciatica, as being a too permanent reproof of her carelessness as to doors.

Constance also waited, for the fraction of a second, as if expectant.

“Well, Amy,” she said at length in her voice weakened by fatigue and pain. “The letters?”

“There ain’t no letters,” said Amy, grimly. “You might have known, if there’d been any, I should have brought ’em up. Postman went past twenty minutes agone. I’m always being interrupted, and it isn’t as if I hadn’t got enough to do—now!”

She turned to leave, and was pulling the door open.

"Amy!" said a voice sharply. It was Sophia's.

The servant jumped, and in spite of herself obeyed the implicit, imperious command to stop.

"You will please not speak to your mistress in that tone, at any rate while I'm here," said Sophia, icily. "You know she is ill and weak. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I never—" Amy began.

"I don't want to argue," Sophia said angrily. "Please leave the room."

Amy obeyed. She was cowed, in addition to being staggered.

To the persons involved in it, this episode was intensely dramatic. Sophia had surmised that Constance permitted liberties of speech to Amy; she had even guessed that Amy sometimes took licence to be rude. But that the relations between them were such as to allow the bullying of Constance by an Amy downright insolent—this had shocked and wounded Sophia, who suddenly had a vision of Constance as the victim of a reign of terror. "If the creature will do this while I'm here," said Sophia to herself, "what does she do when they are alone together in the house?"

"Well," she exclaimed, "I never heard of such goings-on! And you let her talk to you in that style! My dear Constance!"

Constance was sitting up in bed, the small tea-tray on her knees. Her eyes were moist. The tears had filled them when she knew that there was no letter. Ordinarily the failure of Cyril's letter would not have made her cry, but weakness had impaired her self-control. And the tears having once got into her eyes, she could not dismiss them. There they were!

"She's been with me such a long time," Constance murmured. "She takes liberties. I've Corrected her once or twice."

"Liberties!" Sophia repeated the word. "Liberties!"

"Of course I really ought not to allow it," said Constance. "I ought to have put a stop to it long since."

"Well," said Sophia, rather relieved by this symptom of Constance's secret mind, "I do hope you won't think I'm meddlesome, but truly it was too much for me. The words were out of my mouth before I—" She stopped.

"You were quite right, quite right," said Constance, seeing before her in the woman of fifty the passionate girl of fifteen.

"I've had a good deal of experience of servants," said Sophia.

"I know you have," Constance put in.

"And I'm convinced that it never pays to stand any sauce. Servants don't understand kindness and forbearance. And this sort of thing grows and grows till you can't call your soul your own."

"You are quite right," Constance said again, with even more positiveness.

Not merely the conviction that Sophia was quite right, but the desire to assure Sophia that Sophia was not meddlesome, gave force to her utterance. Amy's allusion to extra work shamed Amy's mistress as a hostess, and she was bound to make amends.

"Now as to that woman," said Sophia in a lower voice, as she sat down confidentially on the edge of the bed. And she told Constance about Amy and the dogs, and about Amy's rudeness in the kitchen. "I should never have *dreamt* of mentioning such things," she finished. "But under the circumstances I felt it right that you should know. I feel you ought to know."

And Constance nodded her head in thorough agreement. She did not trouble to go into articulate apologies to her guest for the actual misdeeds of her servant. The sisters were now on a plane of intimacy where such apologies would have been supererogatory. Their voices fell lower and lower, and the case of Amy was laid bare and discussed to the minutest detail.

Gradually they realized that what had occurred was a crisis. They were both very excited, apprehensive, and rather too consciously defiant. At the same time they were drawn very close to each other, by Sophia's generous indignation and by Constance's absolute loyalty.

A long time passed before Constance said, thinking about something else:

"I expect it's been delayed in the post."

"Cyril's letter? Oh, no doubt! If you knew the posts in France, my word!"

Then they determined, with little sighs, to face the crisis cheerfully.

In truth it was a crisis, and a great one. The sensation of the crisis affected the atmosphere of the entire house. Constance got up for tea and managed to walk to the drawing-room. And when Sophia, after an absence in her own room, came down to tea and found the tea all served, Constance whispered:

"She's given notice! And Sunday too!"

"What did she say?"

"She didn't say much," Constance replied vaguely, hiding from Sophia that Amy had harped on the too great profusion of mistresses in that house. "After all, it's just as well. She'll be all right She's saved a good bit of money, and she has friends."

"But how foolish of her to give up such a good place!"

"She simply doesn't care," said Constance, who was a little hurt by Amy's defection. "When she takes a thing into her head she simply doesn't care. She's got no common sense. I've always known that."

"So you're going to leave, Amy?" said Sophia that evening, as Amy was passing through the parlour on her

way to bed. Constance was already arranged for the night.

"I am, m'm," answered Amy, precisely.

Her tone was not rude, but it was firm. She had apparently reconnoitred her position in calmness.

"I'm sorry I was obliged to correct you this morning," said Sophia, with cheerful amicableness, pleased in spite of herself with the woman's tone. "But I think you will see that I had reason to."

"I've been thinking it over, m'm," said Amy, with dignity, "and I see as I must leave."

There was a pause.

"Well, you know best . . . Good night, Amy."

"Good night, m'm."

"She's a decent woman," thought Sophia, "but hopeless for this place now."

The sisters were fronted with the fact that Constance had a month in which to find a new servant, and that a new servant would have to be trained in well-doing and might easily prove disastrous. Both Constance and Amy were profoundly disturbed by the prospective dissolution of a bond which dated from the seventies. And both were decided that there was no alternative to the dissolution. Outsiders knew merely that Mrs Povey's old servant was leaving. Outsiders merely saw Mrs Povey's advertisement in the *Signal* for a new servant. They could not read hearts. Some of the younger generation even said superiorly that old-fashioned women like Mrs Povey seemed to have servants on the brain, etc., etc.

II

"Well, have you got your letter?" Sophia demanded cheerfully of Constance when she entered the bedroom the next morning.

Constance merely shook her head. She was very depressed. Sophia's cheerfulness died out. As she hated to be insincerely optimistic, she said nothing. Otherwise she might have remarked: "Perhaps the afternoon post will bring it." Gloom reigned. To Constance particularly, as Amy had given notice and as Cyril was "remiss," it seemed really that the time was out of joint and life unworth living. Even the presence of Sophia did not bring her much comfort. Immediately Sophia left the room Constance's sciatica began to return, and in a severe form. She had regretted this, less for the pain than because she had just assured Sophia, quite honestly, that she was not suffering; Sophia had been sceptical. After that it was of course imperative that Constance should get up as usual. She had said that she would get up as usual. Besides, there was the immense enterprise of obtaining a new servant! Worries loomed mountainous. Suppose Cyril was dangerously ill, and unable to write! Suppose something had happened to him! Supposing she never did obtain a new servant!

Sophia, up in her room, was endeavouring to be philosophical, and to see the world brightly. She was saying to herself that she must take Constance in hand, that what Constance lacked was energy, that Constance must be stirred out of her groove. And in the cavernous kitchen Amy, preparing the nine o'clock breakfast, was meditating upon the ingratitude of employers and wondering what the future held for her. She had a widowed mother in the picturesque village of Sneyd, where the mortal and immortal welfare of every inhabitant was watched over by God's vicegerent, the busy Countess of Chell; she possessed about two hundred pounds of her own; her mother for years had been begging Amy to share her home free of expense. But nevertheless Amy's mind was black with foreboding and vague dejection. The house was a house of sorrow, and these three women, each solitary, the devotees of sorrow. And the two dogs wandered disconsolate up and down, aware of the necessity for circumspection, never guessing that the highly peculiar state of the atmosphere had been brought about by nothing but a half-shut door and an incorrect tone.

As Sophia, fully dressed this time, was descending to breakfast, she heard Constance's voice, feebly calling her, and found the convalescent still in bed. The truth could not be concealed. Constance was once more in great pain, and her moral condition was not favourable to fortitude.

"I wish you had told me, to begin with," Sophia could not help saying, "then I should have known what to do."

Constance did not defend herself by saying that the pain bad only recurred since their first interview that morning. She just wept.

"I'm very low!" she blubbered.

Sophia was surprised. She felt that this was not "being a Baines."

During the progress of that interminable April morning, her acquaintance with the possibilities of sciatica as an agent destructive of moral fibre was further increased. Constance had no force at all to resist its activity. The sweetness of her resignation seemed to melt into nullity. She held to it that the doctor could do nothing for her.

About noon, when Sophia was moving anxiously around her, she suddenly screamed.

"I feel as if my leg was going to burst!" she cried.

That decided Sophia. As soon as Constance was a little easier she went downstairs to Amy.

"Amy," she said, "it's a Doctor Stirling that your mistress has when she's ill, isn't it?"

"Yes, m'm."

"Where is his surgery?"

“Well, m’m, he did live just opposite, with Dr Harrop, but latterly he’s gone to live at Bleakridge.”

“I wish you would put your things on, and run up there and ask him to call as soon as he can.”

“I will, m’m,” said Amy, with the greatest willingness. “I thought I heard missis cry out.” She was not effusive. She was better than effusive: kindly and helpful with a certain reserve.

“There’s something about that woman I like,” said Sophia to herself. For a proved fool, Amy was indeed holding her own rather well.

Dr Stirling drove down about two o’clock. He had now been established in the Five Towns for more than a decade, and the stamp of success was on his brow and on the proud forehead of his trotting horse. He had, in the phrase of the *Signal*, “identified himself with the local life of the district.” He was liked, being a man of broad sympathies. In his rich Scotch accent he could discuss with equal ability the flavour of whisky or of a sermon, and he had more than sufficient tact never to discuss either whiskies or sermons in the wrong place. He had made a speech (responding for the learned professions) at the annual dinner of the Society for the Prosecution of Felons, and this speech (in which praise of red wine was rendered innocuous by praise of books —his fine library was notorious) had classed him as a wit with the American consul, whose post-prandial manner was modelled on Mark Twain’s. He was thirty-five years of age, tall and stoutish, with a chubby boyish face that the razor left chiefly blue every morning.

The immediate effect of his arrival on Constance was miraculous. His presence almost cured her for a moment, just as though her malady had been toothache and he a dentist. Then, when he had finished his examination, the pain resumed its sway over her.

In talking to her and to Sophia, he listened very seriously to all that they said; he seemed to regard the case as the one case that had ever aroused his genuine professional interest; but as it unfolded itself, in all its difficulty and urgency, so he seemed, in his mind, to be discovering wondrous ways of dealing with it; these mysterious discoveries seemed to give him confidence, and his confidence was communicated to the patient by means of faint sallies of humour. He was a highly skilled doctor. This fact, however, had no share in his popularity; which was due solely to his rare gift of taking a case very seriously while remaining cheerful.

He said he would return in a quarter of an hour, and he returned in thirteen minutes with a hypodermic syringe, with which he attacked the pain in its central strongholds.

“What is it?” asked Constance, breathing gratitude for the relief.

He paused, looking at her roguishly from under lowered eyelids.

“I’d better not tell ye,” he said. “It might lead ye into mischief.”

“Oh, but you must tell me doctor,” Constance insisted, anxious that he should live up to his reputation for Sophia’s benefit.

“It’s hydrochloride of cocaine,” he said, and lifted a finger. “Beware of the cocaine habit. It’s mined many a respectable family. But if I hadn’t a certain amount of confidence in yer strength of character, Mrs Povey, I wouldn’t have risked it.”

“He will have his joke, will the doctor!” Constance smiled, in a brighter world.

He said he should come again about half-past five, and he arrived about half-past six, and injected more cocaine. The special importance of the case was thereby established. On this second visit, he and Sophia soon grew rather friendly. When she conducted him downstairs again he stopped chatting with her in the parlour for a long time, as though he had nothing else on earth to do, while his coachman walked the horse to and fro in front of the door.

His attitude to her flattered Sophia, for it showed that he took her for no ordinary woman. It implied a continual assumption that she must be a mine of interest for anyone who was privileged to delve into her memory. So far, among Constance’s acquaintance, Sophia had met no one who showed more than a perfunctory curiosity as to her life. Her return was accepted with indifference. Her escapade of thirty years ago had entirely lost its dramatic quality. Many people indeed had never heard that she had run away from home to marry a commercial traveller; and to those who remembered, or had been told, it seemed a sufficiently banal exploit—after thirty years! Her fear, and Constance’s, that the town would be murmurous with gossip was ludicrously unfounded. The effect of time was such that even Mr Critchlow appeared to have forgotten even that she had been indirectly responsible for her father’s death. She had nearly forgotten it herself; when she happened to think of it she felt no shame, no remorse, seeing the death as purely accidental, and not altogether unfortunate. On two points only was the town inquisitive: as to her husband, and as to the precise figure at which she had sold the Pension. The town knew that she was probably not a widow, for she had been obliged to tell Mr Critchlow, and Mr Critchlow in some hour of tenderness had told Maria. But nobody had dared to mention the name of Gerald Scales to her. With her fashionable clothes, her striking mien of command, and the legend of her wealth, she inspired respect, if not awe, in the townsfolk. In the doctor’s attitude there was something of amaze; she felt it. Though the dull apathy of the people she had hitherto met was assuredly not without its advantageous side for her tranquillity of mind, it had touched her vanity, and the gaze of the doctor soothed the smart. He had so obviously divined her interestingness; he so obviously wanted to enjoy it.

“I’ve just been reading Zola’s *Downfall,*” he said.

Her mind searched backwards, and recalled a poster.

"Oh!" she replied. "*La Débâcle*?"

"Yes. What do ye think of it?" His eyes lighted at the prospect of a talk. He was even pleased to hear her give him the title in French.

"I haven't read it," she said, and she was momentarily sorry that she had not read it, for she could see that he was dashed. The doctor had supposed that residence in a foreign country involved a knowledge of the literature of that country. Yet he had never supposed that residence in England involved a knowledge of English literature. Sophia had read practically nothing since 1870; for her the latest author was Cherbuliez. Moreover, her impression of Zola was that he was not at all nice, and that he was the enemy of his race, though at that date the world had scarcely heard of Dreyfus. Dr Stirling had too hastily assumed that the opinions of the bourgeois upon art differ in different countries.

"And ye actually were in the siege of Paris?" he questioned, trying again.

"Yes."

"*And* the commune?"

"Yes, the commune too."

"Well!" he exclaimed. "It's incredible! When I was reading the *Downfall* the night before last, I said to myself that you must have been through a lot of all that. I didn't know I was going to have the pleasure of a chat with ye so soon."

She smiled. "But how did you know I was in the siege of Paris?" she asked, curious.

"How do I know? I know because I've seen that birthday card ye sent to Mrs Povey in 1871, after it was over. It's one of her possessions, that card is. She showed it me one day when she told me ye were coming."

Sophia started. She had quite forgotten that card. It had not occurred to her that Constance would have treasured all those cards that she had despatched during the early years of her exile. She responded as well as she could to his eagerness for personal details concerning the siege and the commune. He might have been disappointed at the prose of her answers, had he not been determined not to be disappointed.

"Ye seem to have taken it all very quietly," he observed.

"Eh yes!" she agreed, not without pride. "But it's a long time since."

Those events, as they existed in her memory, scarcely warranted the tremendous fuss subsequently made about them. What were they, after all? Such was her secret thought. Chirac himself was now nothing but a faint shadow. Still, were the estimate of those events true or false, she was a woman who had been through them, and Dr Stirling's high appreciation of that fact was very pleasant to her. Their friendliness approached intimacy. Night had fallen. Outside could be heard the champing of a bit.

"I must be getting on," he said at last; but he did not move.

"Then there is nothing else I am to do for my sister?" Sophia inquired.

"I don't think so," said he. "It isn't a question of medicine."

"Then what is it a question of?" Sophia demanded bluntly.

"Nerves," he said. "It's nearly all nerves. I know something about Mrs Povey's constitution now, and I was hoping that your visit would do her good."

"She's been quite well—I mean what you may call quite well—until the day before yesterday, when she sat in that draught. She was better last night, and then this morning I find her ever so much worse."

"No worries?" The doctor looked at her confidentially.

"What *can* she have in the way of worries?" exclaimed Sophia. "That's to say—real worries."

"Exactly!" the doctor agreed.

"I tell her she doesn't know what worry is," said Sophia.

"So do I!" said the doctor, his eyes twinkling.

"She was a little upset because she didn't receive her usual Sunday letter from Cyril yesterday. But then she was weak and low."

"Clever youth, Cyril!" mused the doctor.

"I think he's a particularly nice boy," said Sophia, eagerly.

"So you've seen him?"

"Of course," said Sophia, rather stiffly. Did the doctor suppose that she did not know her own nephew? She went back to the subject of her sister. "She is also a little bothered, I think, because the servant is going to leave."

"Oh! So Amy is going to leave, is she?" He spoke still lower. "Between you and me, it's no bad thing."

"I'm so glad you think so."

"In another few years the servant would have been the mistress here. One can see these things coming on, but it's so difficult to do anything. In fact ye can't do anything."

"I did something," said Sophia, sharply. "I told the woman straight that it shouldn't go on while I was in the house. I didn't suspect it at first—but when I found it out . . . I can tell you!" She let the doctor imagine what she could tell him.

He smiled. "No," he said. "I can easily understand that ye didn't suspect anything at first. When she's well and bright Mrs Povey could hold her own—so I'm told. But it was certainly slowly getting worse."

"Then people talk about it?" said Sophia, shocked.

“As a native of Bursley, Mrs Scales,” said the doctor, “ye ought to know what people in Bursley do!” Sophia put her lips together. The doctor rose, smoothing his waistcoat. “What does she bother with servants at all for?” he burst out. “She’s perfectly free. She hasn’t got a care in the world, if she only knew it. Why doesn’t she go out and about, and enjoy herself? She wants stirring up, that’s what your sister wants.”

“You’re quite right,” Sophia burst out in her turn. “That’s precisely what I say to myself, precisely! I was thinking it over only this morning. She wants stirring up. She’s got into a rut.”

“She needs to be jolly. Why doesn’t she go to some seaside place, and live in a hotel, and enjoy herself? Is there anything to prevent her?”

“Nothing whatever.”

“Instead of being dependent on a servant! I believe in enjoying one’s self—when ye’ve got the money to do it with! Can ye imagine anybody living in Bursley for pleasure? And especially in St Luke’s Square, right in the thick of it all! Smoke! Dirt! No air! No light! No scenery! No amusements! What does she do it for? She’s in a rut.”

“Yes, she’s in a rut,” Sophia repeated her own phrase, which he had copied.

“My word!” said the doctor. “Wouldn’t I clear out and enjoy myself if I could! Your sister’s a young woman.”

“Of course she is!” Sophia concurred, feeling that she herself was even younger. “Of course she is!”

“And except that she’s nervously organized, and has certain predispositions, there’s nothing the matter with her. This sciatica—I don’t say it would be cured, but it might be, by a complete change and throwing off all these ridiculous worries. Not only does she live in the most depressing conditions, but she suffers tortures for it, and there’s absolutely no need for her to be here at all.”

“Doctor,” said Sophia, solemnly, impressed, “you are quite right. I agree with every word you say.”

“Naturally she’s attached to the place,” he continued, glancing round the room. “I know all about that. After living here all her life! But she’s got to break herself of her attachment. It’s her duty to do so. She ought to show a little energy. I’m deeply attached to my bed in the morning, but I have to leave it.”

“Of course,” said Sophia, in an impatient tone, as though disgusted with every person who could not perceive, or would not subscribe to, these obvious truths that the doctor was uttering. “Of course!”

“What she needs is the bustle of life in a good hotel, a good hydro, for instance. Among jolly people. Parties! Games! Excursions! She wouldn’t be the same woman. You’d see. Wouldn’t I do it, if I could? Strathpeffer. She’d soon forget her sciatica. I don’t know what Mrs Povey’s annual income is, but I expect that if she took it into her head to live in the dearest hotel in England, there would be no reason why she shouldn’t.”

Sophia lifted her head and smiled in calm amusement. “I expect so,” she said superiorly.

“A hotel—that’s the life. No worries. If ye want anything ye ring a bell. If a waiter gives notice, it’s someone else who has the worry, not you. But you know all about that, Mrs Scales.”

“No one better,” murmured Sophia.

“Good evening,” he said abruptly, sticking out his hand. “I’ll be down in the morning.”

“Did you ever mention this to my sister?” Sophia asked him, rising.

“Yes,” said he. “But it’s no use. Oh yes, I’ve told her. But she does really think it’s quite impossible. She wouldn’t even hear of going to live in London with her beloved son. She won’t listen.”

“I never thought of that,” said Sophia. “Good night.”

Their hand-grasp was very intimate and mutually comprehending. He was pleased by the quick responsiveness of her temperament, and the masterful vigour which occasionally flashed out in her replies. He noticed the hardly perceptible distortion of her handsome, worn face, and he said to himself: “She’s been through a thing or two,” and: “She’ll have to mind her p’s and q’s.” Sophia was pleased because he admired her, and because with her he dropped his bedside jocularities, and talked plainly as a sensible man will talk when he meets an uncommonly wise woman, and because he echoed and amplified her own thoughts. She honoured him by standing at the door till he had driven off.

For a few moments she mused solitary in the parlour, and then, lowering the gas, she went upstairs to her sister, who lay in the dark. Sophia struck a match.

“You’ve been having quite a long chat with the doctor,” said Constance. “He’s very good company, isn’t he? What did he talk about this time?”

“He wanted to know about Paris and so on,” Sophia answered.

“Oh! I believe he’s a rare student.”

Lying there in the dark, the simple Constance never suspected that those two active and strenuous ones had been arranging her life for her, so that she should be jolly and live for twenty years yet. She did not suspect that she had been tried and found guilty of sinful attachments, and of being in a rut, and of lacking the elements of ordinary sagacity. It had not occurred to her that if she was worried and ill, the reason was to be found in her own blind and stupid obstinacy. She had thought herself a fairly sensible kind of creature.

III

The sisters had an early supper together in Constance's bedroom. Constance was much easier. Having a fancy that a little movement would be beneficial, she had even got up for a few moments and moved about the room. Now she sat ensconced in pillows. A fire burned in the old-fashioned ineffectual grate. From the Sun Vaults opposite came the sound of a phonograph singing an invitation to God to save its gracious queen. This phonograph was a wonderful novelty, and filled the Sun nightly. For a few evenings it had interested the sisters, in spite of themselves, but they had soon sickened of it and loathed it. Sophia became more and more obsessed by the monstrous absurdity of the simple fact that she and Constance were there, in that dark inconvenient house, wearied by the gaiety of public-houses, blackened by smoke, surrounded by mud, instead of being luxuriously installed in a beautiful climate, amid scenes of beauty and white cleanliness. Secretly she became more and more indignant.

Amy entered, bearing a letter in her coarse hand. As Amy unceremoniously handed the letter to Constance, Sophia thought: "If she was my servant she would hand letters on a tray." (An advertisement had already been sent to the *Signal*.)

Constance took the letter trembling. "Here it is at last," she cried.

When she had put on her spectacles and read it, she exclaimed:

"Bless us! Here's news! He's coming down! That's why he didn't write on Saturday as usual."

She gave the letter to Sophia to read. It ran—

Sunday midnight.

Dear Mother,

Just a line to say I am coming down to Bursley on Wednesday, on business with Peels. I shall get to Knype at 5.28, and take the Loop. I've been very busy, and as I was coming down I didn't write on Saturday. I hope you didn't worry. Love to yourself and Aunt Sophia.

Yours, C.

"I must send him a line," said Constance, excitedly.

"What? Tonight?"

"Yes. Amy can easily catch the last post with it. Otherwise he won't know that I've got his letter."

She rang the bell.

Sophia thought: "His coming down is really no excuse for his not writing on Saturday. How could she guess that he was coming down? I shall have to put in a little word to that young man. I wonder Constance is so blind. She is quite satisfied now that his letter has come." On behalf of the elder generation she rather resented Constance's eagerness to write in answer.

But Constance was not so blind. Constance thought exactly as Sophia thought. In her heart she did not at all justify or excuse Cyril. She remembered separately almost every instance of his carelessness in her regard. "Hope I didn't worry, indeed!" she said to herself with a faint touch of bitterness, apropos of the phrase in his letter.

Nevertheless she insisted on writing at once. And Amy had to bring the writing materials.

"Mr Cyril is coming down on Wednesday," she said to Amy with great dignity.

Amy's stony calmness was shaken, for Mr Cyril was a great deal to Amy. Amy wondered how she would be able to look Mr Cyril in the face when he knew that she had given notice.

In the middle of writing, on her knee, Constance looked up at Sophia, and said, as though defending herself against an accusation: "I didn't write to him yesterday, you know, or today."

"No," Sophia murmured assentingly.

Constance rang the bell yet again, and Amy was sent out to the post.

Soon afterwards the bell was rung for the fourth time, and not answered.

"I suppose she hasn't come back yet. But I thought I heard the door. What a long time she is!"

"What do you want?" Sophia asked.

"I just want to speak to her," said Constance.

When the bell had been rung seven or eight times, Amy at length reappeared, somewhat breathless.

"Amy," said Constance, "let me examine those sheets, will you?"

"Yes'm," said Amy, apparently knowing what sheets, of all the various and multitudinous sheets in that house.

"And the pillow-cases," Constance added as Amy left the room.

So it continued. The next day the fever heightened. Constance was up early, before Sophia, and trotting about the house like a girl. Immediately after breakfast Cyril's bedroom was invested and revolutionized; not till evening was order restored in that chamber. And on the Wednesday morning it had to be dusted afresh. Sophia watched the preparations, and the increasing agitation of Constance's demeanour, with an astonishment which she had real difficulty in concealing. "Is the woman absolutely mad?" she asked herself. The spectacle was ludicrous: or it seemed so to Sophia, whose career had not embraced much experience of

mothers. It was not as if the manifestations of Constance's anxiety were dignified or original or splendid. They were just silly, ordinary fussinesses; they had no sense in them. Sophia was very careful to make no observation. She felt that before she and Constance were very much older she had a very great deal to do, and that a subtle diplomacy and wary tactics would be necessary. Moreover, Constance's angelic temper was slightly affected by the strain of expectation. She had a tendency to rasp. After the high-tea was set she suddenly sprang on to the sofa and lifted down the "Stag at Eve" engraving. The dust on the top of the frame incensed her.

"What are you going to do?" Sophia asked, in a final marvel.

"I'm going to change it with that one," said Constance, pointing to another engraving opposite the fireplace. "He said the effect would be very much better if they were changed. And his lordship is very particular."

Constance did not go to Bursley station to meet her son. She explained that it upset her to do so, and that also Cyril preferred her not to come.

"Suppose I go to meet him," said Sophia, at half-past five. The idea had visited her suddenly. She thought: "Then I could talk to him before anyone else."

"Oh, *do*!" Constance agreed.

Sophia put her things on with remarkable expedition. She arrived at the station a minute before the train came in. Only a few persons emerged from the train, and Cyril was not among them. A porter said that there was not supposed to be any connexion between the Loop Line trains and the main line expresses, and that probably the express had missed the Loop. She waited thirty-five minutes for the next Loop, and Cyril did not emerge from that train either.

Constance opened the front door to her, and showed a telegram—

Sorry prevented last moment. Writing. CYRIL.

Sophia had known it. Somehow she had known that it was useless to wait for the second train. Constance was silent and calm; Sophia also.

"What a shame! What a shame!" thumped Sophia's heart.

It was the most ordinary episode. But beneath her calm she was furious against her favourite. She hesitated.

"I'm just going out a minute," she said.

"Where?" asked Constance. "Hadn't we better have tea? I suppose we must have tea."

"I shan't be long. I want to buy something."

Sophia went to the post-office and despatched a telegram. Then, partially eased, she returned to the arid and painful desolation of the house.

IV

The next evening Cyril sat at the tea-table in the parlour with his mother and his aunt. To Constance his presence there had something of the miraculous in it. He had come, after all! Sophia was in a rich robe, and for ornament wore an old silver-gilt neck-chain, which was clasped at the throat, and fell in double to her waist, where it was caught in her belt. This chain interested Cyril. He referred to it once or twice, and then he said: "Just let me have a *look* at that chain," and put out his hands; and Sophia leaned forward so that he could handle it. His fingers played with it thus for some seconds; the picture strikingly affected Constance. At length he dropped it, and said: "H'm!" After a pause he said: "Louis Sixteenth, eh?" and Sophia said:

"They told me so. But it's nothing; it only cost thirty francs, you know." And Cyril took her up sharply:

"What does that matter?" Then after another pause he asked: "How often do you break a link of it?"

"Oh, often," she said. "It's always getting shorter."

And he murmured mysteriously: "H'm!"

He was still mysterious, withdrawn within himself, extraordinarily uninterested in his physical surroundings. But that evening he talked more than he usually did. He was benevolent, and showed a particular benevolence towards his mother, apparently exerting himself to answer her questions with fullness and heartiness, as though admitting frankly her right to be curious. He praised the tea; he seemed to notice what he was eating. He took Spot on his knee, and gazed in admiration at Fossette.

"By Jove!" he said, "that's a dog, that is! . . . All the same . . ." And he burst out laughing.

"I won't have Fossette laughed at," Sophia warned him.

"No, seriously," he said, in his quality of an amateur of dogs; "she is very fine." Even then he could not help adding: "What you can see of her!"

Whereupon Sophia shook her head, deprecating such wit. Sophia was very lenient towards him. Her leniency could be perceived in her eyes, which followed his movements all the time. "Do you think he is like me, Constance?" she asked.

"I wish I was half as good looking," said Cyril, quickly; and Constance said:

"As a baby he was very like you. He was a handsome baby. He wasn't at all like you when he was at school. These last few years he's begun to be like you again. He's very much changed since he left school; he was

rather heavy and clumsy then."

"Heavy and clumsy!" exclaimed Sophia. "Well, I should never have believed it!"

"Oh, but he was!" Constance insisted.

"Now, mater," said Cyril, "it's a pity you don't want that cake cutting into. I think I could have eaten a bit of that cake. But of course if it's only for show . . . !"

Constance sprang up, seizing a knife.

"You shouldn't tease your mother," Sophia told him. "He doesn't really want any, Constance; he's regularly stuffed himself."

And Cyril agreed, "No, no, mater, don't cut it; I really couldn't. I was only gassing."

But Constance could never clearly see through humour of that sort. She cut three slices of cake, and she held the plate towards Cyril.

"I tell you I really couldn't!" he protested.

"Come!" she said obstinately. "I'm waiting! How much longer must I hold this plate?"

And he had to take a slice. So had Sophia. When she was roused, they both of them had to yield to Constance.

With the dogs, and the splendour of the tea-table under the gas, and the distinction of Sophia and Cyril, and the conversation, which on the whole was gay and free, rising at times to jolly garrulity, the scene in her parlour ought surely to have satisfied Constance utterly. She ought to have been quite happy, as her sciatica had raised the siege for a space. But she was not quite happy. The circumstances of Cyril's arrival had disturbed her; they had in fact wounded her, though she would scarcely admit the wound. In the morning she had received a brief letter from Cyril to say that he had not been able to come, and vaguely promising, or half-promising, to run down at a later date. That letter had the cardinal defects of all Cyril's relations with his mother: it was casual, and it was not candid. It gave no hint of the nature of the obstacle which had prevented him from coming. Cyril had always been too secretive. She was gravely depressed by the letter, which she did not show to Sophia, because it impaired her dignity as a mother, and displayed her son in a bad light. Then about eleven o'clock a telegram had come for Sophia.

"That's all right," Sophia had said, on reading it. "He'll be here this evening!" And she had handed over the telegram, which read—

Very well. Will come same train today.

And Constance learned that when Sophia had rushed out just before tea on the previous evening, it was to telegraph to Cyril.

"What did you say to him?" Constance asked.

"Oh!" said Sophia, with a careless air, "I told him I thought he ought to come. After all, you're more important than any *business,* Constance! And I don't like him behaving like that. I was determined he should come!"

Sophia had tossed her proud head.

Constance had pretended to be pleased and grateful. But the existence of a wound was incontestable. Sophia, then, could do more with Cyril than she could! Sophia had only met him once, and could simply twist him round her little finger. He would never have done so much for his mother. A fine sort of an obstacle it must have been, if a single telegram from Sophia could overcome it . . . ! And Sophia, too, was secretive. She had gone out and had telegraphed, and had not breathed a word until she got the reply, sixteen hours later. She was secretive, and Cyril was secretive. They resembled one another. They had taken to one another. But Sophia was a curious mixture. When Constance had asked her if she should go to the station again to meet Cyril, she had replied scornfully: "No, indeed! I've done going to meet Cyril. People who don't arrive must not expect to be met."

When Cyril drove up to the door, Sophia had been in attendance. She hurried down the steps. "Don't say anything about my telegram," she had rapidly whispered to Cyril; there was no time for further explanation. Constance was at the top of the steps. Constance had not heard the whisper, but she had seen it; and she saw a guilty, puzzled look on Cyril's face, afterwards an ineffectively concealed conspiratorial look on both their faces. They had "something between them," from which she, the mother, was shut out! Was it not natural that she should be wounded? She was far too proud to mention the telegrams. And as neither Cyril nor Sophia mentioned them, the circumstances leading to Cyril's change of plan were not referred to at all, which was very curious. Then Cyril was more sociable than he had ever been; he was different, under his aunt's gaze. Certainly he treated his mother faultlessly. But Constance said to herself: "It is because she is here that he is so specially nice to me."

When tea was finished and they were going upstairs to the drawing-room, she asked him, with her eye on the "Stag at Eve" engraving:

"Well, is it a success?"

"What?" His eye followed hers. "Oh, you've changed it! What did you do that for, mater?"

"You said it would be better like that," she reminded him.

“Did I?” He seemed genuinely surprised. “I don’t remember. I believe it is better, though,” he added. “It might be better still if you turned it the other way up.”

He pulled a face to Sophia, and screwed up his shoulders, as if to indicate: “I’ve done it, this time!”

“How? The other way up?” Constance queried. Then as she comprehended that he was teasing her, she said: “Get away with you!” and pretended to box his ears. “You were fond enough of that picture at one time!” she said ironically.

“Yes, I was, mater,” he submissively agreed. “There’s no getting over that.” And he pressed her cheeks between his hands and kissed her.

In the drawing-room he smoked cigarettes and played the piano—waltzes of his own composition. Constance and Sophia did not entirely comprehend those waltzes. But they agreed that all were wonderful and that one was very pretty indeed. (It soothed Constance that Sophia’s opinion coincided with hers.) He said that that waltz was the worst of the lot. When he had finished with the piano, Constance informed him about Amy. “Oh! She told me,” he said, “when she brought me my water. I didn’t mention it because I thought it would be rather a sore subject.” Beneath the casualness of his tone there lurked a certain curiosity, a willingness to hear details. He heard them.

At five minutes to ten, when Constance had yawned, he threw a bomb among them on the hearthrug.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve got an appointment with Matthew at the Conservative Club at ten o’clock. I must go. Don’t wait up for me.”

Both women protested, Sophia the more vivaciously. It was Sophia now who was wounded.

“It’s business,” he said, defending himself. “He’s going away early tomorrow, and it’s my only chance.” And as Constance did not brighten he went on: “Business has to be attended to. You mustn’t think I’ve got nothing to do but enjoy myself.”

No hint of the nature of the business! He never explained. As to business, Constance knew only that she allowed him three hundred a year, and paid his local tailor. The sum had at first seemed to her enormous, but she had grown accustomed to it.

“I should have preferred you to see Mr Peel-Swynnerton here,” said Constance. “You could have had a room to yourselves. I do not like you going out at ten o’clock at night to a club.”

“Well, good night, mater,” he said, getting up. “See you tomorrow. I shall take the key out of the door. It’s true my pocket will never be the same again.”

Sophia saw Constance into bed, and provided her with two hot-water bottles against sciatica. They did not talk much.

V

Sophia sat waiting on the sofa in the parlour. It appeared to her that, though little more than a month had elapsed since her arrival in Bursley, she had already acquired a new set of interests and anxieties. Paris and her life there had receded in the strangest way. Sometimes for hours she would absolutely forget Paris. Thoughts of Paris were disconcerting; for either Paris or Bursley must surely be unreal! As she sat waiting on the sofa Paris kept coming into her mind. Certainly it was astonishing that she should be just as preoccupied with her schemes for the welfare of Constance as she had ever been preoccupied with schemes for the improvement of the Pension Frensham. She said to herself: “My life has been so queer—and yet every part of it separately seemed ordinary enough—how will it end?”

Then there were footfalls on the steps outside, and a key was put in the door, which she at once opened.

“Oh!” exclaimed Cyril, startled, and also somewhat out of countenance. “You’re still up! Thanks.” He came in, smoking the end of a cigar. “Fancy having to cart that about!” he murmured, holding up the great old-fashioned key before inserting it into the lock on the inside.

“I stayed up,” said Sophia, “because I wanted to talk to you about your mother, and it’s so difficult to get a chance.”

Cyril smiled, not without self-consciousness, and dropped into his mother’s rocking-chair, which he had twisted round with his feet to face the sofa.

“Yes,” he said. “I was wondering what was the real meaning of your telegram. What was it?” He blew out a lot of smoke and waited for her reply.

“I thought you ought to come down,” said Sophia, cheerfully but firmly. “It was a fearful disappointment to your mother that you didn’t come yesterday. And when she’s expecting a letter from you and it doesn’t come, it makes her ill.”

“Oh, well!” he said. “I’m glad it’s no worse. I thought from your telegram there was something seriously wrong. And then when you told me not to mention it—when I came in . . . !”

She saw that he failed to realize the situation, and she lifted her head challengingly.

“You neglect your mother, young man,” she said.

“Oh, come now, auntie!” he answered quite gently. “You mustn’t talk like that. I write to her every week. I’ve never missed a week. I come down as often as—”

“You miss the Sunday sometimes,” Sophia interrupted him.

“Perhaps,” he said doubtfully. “But what—”

“Don’t you understand that she simply lives for your letters? And if one doesn’t come, she’s very upset indeed—can’t eat! And it brings on her sciatica, and I don’t know what!”

He was taken aback by her boldness, her directness.

“But how silly of her! A fellow can’t always—”

“It may be silly. But there it is. You can’t alter her. And, after all, what would it cost you to be more attentive, even to write to her twice a week? You aren’t going to tell me you’re so busy as all that! I know a great deal more about young men than your mother does.” She smiled like an aunt.

He answered her smile sheepishly.

“If you’ll only put yourself in your mother’s place . . . !”

“I expect you’re quite right,” he said at length. “And I’m much obliged to you for telling me. How was I to know?” He threw the end of the cigar, with a large sweeping gesture, into the fire.

“Well, anyhow, you know now!” she said curtly; and she thought: “You *ought* to have known. It was your business to know.” But she was pleased with the way in which he had accepted her criticism, and the gesture with which he threw away the cigar-end struck her as very distinguished.

“That’s all right!” he said dreamily, as if to say: “That’s done with.” And he rose.

Sophia, however, did not stir.

“Your mother’s health is not what it ought to be,” she went on, and gave him a full account of her conversation with the doctor.

“Really!” Cyril murmured, leaning on the mantelpiece with his elbow and looking down at her. “Stirling said that, did he? I should have thought she would have been better where she is, in the Square.”

“Why better in the Square?”

“Oh, I don’t know!”

“Neither do I!”

“She’s always been here.”

“Yes,” said Sophia, “she’s been here a great deal too long.”

“What do *you* suggest?” Cyril asked, with impatience in his voice against this new anxiety that was being thrust upon him.

“Well,” said Sophia, “what should you say to her coming to London and living with you?”

Cyril started back. Sophia could see that he was genuinely shocked. “I don’t think that would do at all,” he said.

“Why?”

“Oh! I don’t think it would. London wouldn’t suit her. She’s not that sort of woman. I really thought she was quite all right down here. She wouldn’t like London.” He shook his head, looking up at the gas; his eyes had a dangerous glare.

“But supposing she said she did?”

“Look here,” Cyril began in a new and brighter tone. “Why don’t you and she keep house together somewhere? That would be the very—”

He turned his head sharply. There was a noise on the staircase, and the staircase door opened with its eternal creak.

“Yes,” said Sophia. “The Champs Elysées begins at the Place de la Concorde, and ends—Is that you, Constance?”

The figure of Constance filled the doorway. Her face was troubled. She had heard Cyril in the street, and had come down to see why he remained so long in the parlour. She was astounded to find Sophia with him. There they were, as intimate as cronies, chattering about Paris! Undoubtedly she was jealous! Never did Cyril talk like that to her!

“I thought you were in bed and asleep, Sophia,” she said weakly. “It’s nearly one o’clock.”

“No,” said Sophia. “I didn’t seem to feel like going to bed; and then Cyril happened to come in.”

But neither she nor Cyril could look innocent. And Constance glanced from one to the other apprehensively.

The next morning Cyril received a letter which, he said—with no further explanations—forced him to leave at once. He intimated that there had been danger in his coming just then, and that matters had turned out as he had feared.

“You think over what I said,” he whispered to Sophia when they were alone for an instant, “and let me know.”

VI

A week before Easter the guests of the Rutland Hotel in the Broad Walk, Buxton, being assembled for afternoon tea in the “lounge” of that establishment, witnessed the arrival of two middle-aged ladies and two dogs. Critically to examine newcomers was one of the amusements of the occupants of the lounge. This apartment, furnished “in the oriental style,” made a pretty show among the photographs in the illustrated brochure of the hotel, and, though draughty, it was of all the public rooms the favourite. It was draughty

because only separated from the street (if the Broad Walk can be called a street) by two pairs of swinging-doors—in charge of two page-boys. Every visitor entering the hotel was obliged to pass through the lounge, and for newcomers the passage was an ordeal; they were made to feel that they had so much to learn, so much to get accustomed to; like passengers who join a ship at a port of call, they felt that the business lay before them of creating a niche for themselves in a hostile and haughty society. The two ladies produced a fairly favourable impression at the outset by reason of their two dogs. It is not everyone who has the courage to bring dogs into an expensive private hotel: to bring one dog indicates that you are not accustomed to deny yourself small pleasures for the sake of a few extra shillings; to bring two indicates that you have no fear of hotel-managers and that you are in the habit of regarding your own whim as nature's law. The shorter and stouter of the two ladies did not impose herself with much force on the collective vision of the Rutland; she was dressed in black, not fashionably, though with a certain unpretending richness; her gestures were timid and nervous; evidently she relied upon her tall companion to shield her in the first trying contacts of hotel life. The tall lady was of a different stamp. Handsome, stately, deliberate, and handsomely dressed in colours, she had the assured hard gaze of a person who is thoroughly habituated to the inspection of strangers. She curtly asked one of the page-boys for the manager, and the manager's wife tripped rapidly down the stairs in response, and was noticeably deferential. Her voice was quiet and commanding, the voice of one who gives orders that are obeyed. The opinion of the lounge was divided as to whether or not they were sisters.

They vanished quietly upstairs in convoy of the manager's wife, and they did not reappear for the lounge tea, which in any case would have been undrinkably stewed. It then became known, by the agency of one of those guests, to be found in every hotel, who acquire all the secrets of the hotel by the exercise of unabashed curiosity on the personnel, that the two ladies had engaged two bedrooms, Nos. 17 and 18, and the sumptuous private parlour with a balcony on the first floor, styled "C" in the nomenclature of rooms. This fact definitely established the position of the new arrivals in the moral fabric of the hotel. They were wealthy. They had money to throw away. For even in a select hotel like the Rutland it is not everybody who indulges in a private sitting-room; there were only four such apartments in the hotel, as against fifty bed-rooms.

At dinner they had a small table to themselves in a corner. The short lady wore a white shawl over her shoulders. Her almost apologetic manner during the meal confirmed the view that she must be a very simple person, unused to the world and its ways. The other continued to be imperial. She ordered half a bottle of wine and drank two glasses. She stared about her quite self-unconsciously, whereas the little woman divided her glances between her companion and her plate. They did not talk much. Immediately after dinner they retired. "Widows in easy circumstances" was the verdict; but the contrast between the pair held puzzles that piqued the inquisitive.

Sophia had conquered again. Once more Sophia had resolved to accomplish a thing, and she had accomplished it. Events had fallen out thus. The advertisement for a general servant in the *Signal* had been a disheartening failure. A few answers were received, but of an entirely unsatisfactory character. Constance, a great deal more than Sophia, had been astounded by the beating and the demands of modern setvants. Constance was in despair. If Constance had not had an immense pride she would have been ready to suggest to Sophia that Amy should be asked to "stay on." But Constance would have accepted a modern impudent wench first. It was Maria Critchlow who got Constance out of her difficulty by giving her particulars of a reliable servant who was about to leave a situation in which she had stayed for eight years. Constance did not imagine that a servant recommended by Maria Critchlow would suit her, but, being in a quandary, she arranged to see the servant, and both she and Sophia were very pleased with the girl—Rose Bennion by name. The mischief was that Rose would not be free until about a month after Amy had left. Rose would have left her old situation, but she had a fancy to go and spend a fortnight with a married sister at Manchester before settling into new quarters. Constance and Sophia felt that this caprice of Rose's was really very tiresome and unnecessary. Of course Amy might have been asked to "stay on" just for a month. Amy would probably have volunteered to do so had she been aware of the circumstances. She was not, however, aware of the circumstances. And Constance was determined not to be beholden to Amy for anything. What could the sisters do? Sophia, who had conducted all the interviews with Rose and other candidates, said that it would be a grave error to let Rose slip. Besides, they had no one to take her place, no one who could come at once.

The dilemma was appalling. At least, it seemed appalling to Constance, who really believed that no mistress had ever been so "awkwardly fixed." And yet, when Sophia first proposed her solution, Constance considered it to be a quite impossible solution. Sophia's idea was that they should lock up the house and leave it on the same day as Amy left it, to spend a few weeks in some holiday resort. To begin with, the idea of leaving the house empty seemed to Constance a mad idea. The house had never been left empty. And then—going for a holiday in April! Constance had never been for a holiday except in the month of August. No! The project was beset with difficulties and dangers which could not be overcome or provided against. For example, "We can't come back to a dirty house," said Constance. "And we can't have a strange servant coming here before us." To which Sophia had replied: "Then what *shall* you do?" And Constance, after prodigious reflection on the frightful pass to which destiny had brought her, had said that she supposed she would have to manage with a char-woman until Rose's advent. She asked Sophia if she remembered old Maggie. Sophia, of course, perfectly remembered. Old Maggie was dead, as well as the drunken, amiable Hollins, but there was young Maggie

(wife of a bricklayer) who went out charring in the spare time left from looking after seven children. The more Constance meditated upon young Maggie, the more was she convinced that young Maggie would meet the case. Constance felt that she could trust young Maggie.

This expression of trust in Maggie was Constance's undoing. Why should they not go away, and arrange with Maggie to come to the house a few days before their return, to clean and ventilate? The weight of reason overbore Constance. She yielded unwillingly, but she yielded. It was the mention of Buxton that finally moved her. She knew Buxton. Her old landlady at Buxton was dead, and Constance had not visited the place since before Samuel's death; nevertheless its name had a reassuring sound to her ears, and for sciatica its waters and climate were admitted to be the best in England. Gradually Constance permitted herself to be embarked on this perilous enterprise of shutting up the house for twenty-five days. She imparted the information to Amy, who was astounded. Then she commenced her domestic preparations. She wrapped Samuel's Family Bible in brown paper; she put Cyril's straw-framed copy of Sir Edwin Landseer away in a drawer, and she took ten thousand other precautions. It was grotesque; it was farcical; it was what you please. And when, with the cab at the door and the luggage on the cab, and the dogs chained together, and Maria Critchlow waiting on the pavement to receive the key, Constance put the key into the door on the outside, and locked up the empty house, Constance's face was tragic with innumerable apprehensions. And Sophia felt that she had performed a miracle. She had.

On the whole the sisters were well received in the hotel, though they were not at an age which commands popularity. In the criticism which was passed upon them—the free, realistic and relentless criticism of private hotels—Sophia was at first set down as overbearing. But in a few days this view was modified, and Sophia rose in esteem. The fact was that Sophia's behaviour changed after forty-eight hours. The Rutland Hotel was very good. It was so good as to disturb Sophia's profound beliefs that there was in the world only one truly high-class pension, and that nobody could teach the creator of that unique pension anything about the art of management. The food was excellent; the attendance on the bedrooms was excellent (and Sophia knew how difficult of attainment was excellent bedroom attendance); and to the eye the interior of the Rutland presented a spectacle far richer than the Pension Frensham could show. The standard of comfort was higher. The guests had a more distinguished appearance. It is true that the prices were much higher. Sophia was humbled. She had enough sense to adjust her perspective. Further, she found herself ignorant of many matters which by the other guests were taken for granted and used as a basis for conversation. Prolonged residence in Paris could not justify this ignorance; it seemed rather to intensify its strangeness. Thus, when someone of cosmopolitan experience, having learnt that she had lived in Paris for many years, asked what had been going on lately at the Comédie Française, she had to admit that she had not been in a French theatre for nearly thirty years. And when, on a Sunday, the same person questioned her about the English chaplain in Paris, lo! she knew nothing but his name, had never even seen him. Sophia's life, in its way, had been as narrow as Constance's. Though her experience of human nature was wide, she had been in a groove as deep as Constance's. She had been utterly absorbed in doing one single thing.

By tacit agreement she had charge of the expedition. She paid all the bills. Constance protested against the expensiveness of the affair several times, but Sophia quietened her by sheer force of individuality. Constance had one advantage over Sophia. She knew Buxton and its neighbourhood intimately, and she was therefore in a position to show off the sights and to deal with local peculiarities. In all other respects Sophia led.

They very soon became acclimatized to the hotel. They moved easily between Turkey carpets and sculptured ceilings; their eyes grew used to the eternal vision of themselves and other slow-moving dignities in gilt mirrors, to the heaviness of great oil-paintings of picturesque scenery, to the indications of surreptitious dirt behind massive furniture, to the grey-brown of the shirt-fronts of the waiters, to the litter of trays, boots, and pails in long corridors; their ears were always awake to the sounds of gongs and bells. They consulted the barometer and ordered the daily carriage with the perfunctoriness of habit. They discovered what can be learnt of other people's needlework in a hotel on a wet day. They performed co-operative outings with fellow-guests. They invited fellow-guests into their sitting-room. When there was an entertainment they did not avoid it. Sophia was determined to do everything that could with propriety be done, partly as an outlet for her own energy (which since she left Paris had been accumulating), but more on Constance's account. She remembered all that Dr Stirling had said, and the heartiness of her own agreement with his opinions. It was a great day when, under tuition of an aged lady and in the privacy of their parlour, they both began to study the elements of Patience. Neither had ever played at cards. Constance was almost afraid to touch cards, as though in the very cardboard there had been something unrighteous and perilous. But the respectability of a luxurious private hotel makes proper every act that passes within its walls. And Constance plausibly argued that no harm could come from a game which you played by yourself. She acquired with some aptitude several varieties of Patience. She said: "I think I could enjoy that, if I kept at it. But it does make my head whirl."

Nevertheless Constance was not happy in the hotel. She worried the whole time about her empty house. She anticipated difficulties and even disasters. She wondered again and again whether she could trust the second Maggie in her house alone, whether it would not be better to return home earlier and participate personally in the cleaning. She would have decided to do so had it not been that she hesitated to subject Sophia to the inconvenience of a house upside down. The matter was on her mind, always. Always she was restlessly

anticipating the day when they would leave. She had carelessly left her heart behind in St Luke's Square. She had never stayed in a hotel before, and she did not like it. Sciatica occasionally harassed her. Yet when it came to the point she would not drink the waters. She said she never had drunk them, and seemed to regard that as a reason why she never should. Sophia had achieved a miracle in getting her to Buxton for nearly a month, but the ultimate grand effect lacked brilliance.

Then came the fatal letter, the desolating letter, which vindicated Constance's dark apprehensions. Rose Bennion calmly wrote to say that she had decided not to come to St Luke's Square. She expressed regret for any inconvenience which might possibly be caused; she was polite. But the monstrousness of it! Constance felt that this actually and truly was the deepest depth of her calamities. There she was, far from a dirty home, with no servant and no prospect of a servant! She bore herself bravely, nobly; but she was stricken. She wanted to return to the dirty home at once.

Sophia felt that the situation created by this letter would demand her highest powers of dealing with situations, and she determined to deal with it adequately. Great measures were needed, for Constance's health and happiness were at stake, she alone could act. She knew that she could not rely upon Cyril. She still had an immense partiality for Cyril; she thought him the most charming young man she had ever known; she knew him to be industrious and clever; but in his relations with his mother there was a hardness, a touch of callousness. She explained it vaguely by saying that "they did not get on well together"; which was strange, considering Constance's sweet affectionateness. Still, Constance could be a little trying—at times. Anyhow, it was soon clear to Sophia that the idea of mother and son living together in London was entirely impracticable. No! If Constance was to be saved from herself, there was no one but Sophia to save her.

After half a morning spent chiefly in listening to Constance's hopeless comments on the monstrous letter, Sophia said suddenly that she must take the dogs for an airing. Constance did not feel equal to walking out, and she would not drive. She did not want Sophia to "venture," because the sky threatened. However, Sophia did venture, and she returned a few minutes late for lunch, full of vigour, with two happy dogs. Constance was moodily awaiting her in the dining-room. Constance could not eat. But Sophia ate, and she poured out cheerfulness and energy as from a source inexhaustible. After lunch it began to rain. Constance said she thought she should retire directly to the sitting-room. "I'm coming too," said Sophia, who was still wearing her hat and coat and carried her gloves in her hand. In the pretentious and banal sitting-room they sat down on either side the fire. Constance put a little shawl round her shoulders, pushed her spectacles into her grey hair, folded her hands, and sighed an enormous sigh: "Oh, dear!" She was the tragic muse, aged, and in black silk.

"I tell you what I've been thinking," said Sophia folding up her gloves.

"What?" asked Constance, expecting some wonderful solution to come out of Sophia's active brain.

"There's no earthly reason why you should go back to Bursley. The house won't run away, and it's costing nothing but the rent. Why not take things easy for a bit?"

"And stay here?" said Constance, with an inflection that enlightened Sophia as to the intensity of her dislike of the existence at the Rutland.

"No, not here," Sophia answered with quick deprecation. "There are plenty of other places we could go to."

"I don't think I should be easy in my mind," said Constance. "What with nothing being settled, the house—"

"What does it matter about the house?"

"It matters a great deal," said Constance, seriously, and slightly hurt.

"I didn't leave things as if we were going to be away for a long time. It wouldn't do."

"I don't see that anything could come to any harm, I really don't!" said Sophia, persuasively. "Dirt can always be cleaned, after all. I think you ought to go about more. It would do you good—all the good in the world. And there is no reason why you shouldn't go about. You are perfectly free. Why shouldn't we go abroad together, for instance, you and I? I'm sure you would enjoy it very much."

"Abroad?" murmured Constance, aghast, recoiling from the proposition as from a grave danger.

"Yes," said Sophia, brightly and eagerly. She was determined to take Constance abroad. "There are lots of places we could go to, and live very comfortably among nice English people." She thought of the resorts she had visited with Gerald in the sixties. They seemed to her like cities of a dream. They came back to her as a dream recurs.

"I don't think going abroad would suit me," said Constance.

"But why not? You don't know. You've never tried, my dear." She smiled encouragingly. But Constance did not smile. Constance was inclined to be grim.

"I don't think it would," said she, obstinately. "I'm one of your stay-at-homes. I'm not like you. We can't all be alike," she added, with her "tart" accent.

Sophia suppressed a feeling of irritation. She knew that she had a stronger individuality than Constance's.

"Well, then," she said, with undiminished persuasiveness, "in England or Scotland. There are several places I should like to visit—Torquay, Tunbridge Wells. I've always understood that Tunbridge Wells is a very nice town indeed, with very superior people, and a beautiful climate."

"I think I shall have to be getting back to St Luke's Square," said Constance, ignoring all that Sophia had said. "There's so much to be done."

Then Sophia looked at Constance with a more serious and resolute air; but still kindly, as though looking thus at Constance for Constance's own good.

"You are making a mistake, Constance," she said, "if you will allow me to say so."

"A mistake!" exclaimed Constance, startled.

"A very great mistake," Sophia insisted, observing that she was creating an effect.

"I don't see how I can be making a mistake," Constance said, gaining confidence in herself, as she thought the matter over.

"No," said Sophia, "I'm sure you don't see it. But you are. You know, you are just a little apt to let yourself be a slave to that house of yours. Instead of the house existing for you, you exist for the house."

"Oh! Sophia!" Constance muttered awkwardly. "What ideas you do have, to be sure!" In her nervousness she rose and picked up some embroidery, adjusting her spectacles and coughing. When she sat down she said: "No one could take things easier than I do as regards house-keeping. I can assure you I let dozens of little matters go, rather than bother myself."

"Then why do you bother now?" Sophia posed her.

"I can't leave the place like that." Constance was hurt.

"There's one thing I can't understand," said Sophia, raising her head and gazing at Constance again, "and that is, why you live in St Luke's Square at all."

"I must live somewhere. And I'm sure it's very pleasant."

"In all that smoke! And with that dirt! And the house is very old."

"It's a great deal better built than a lot of those new houses by the Park," Constance sharply retorted. In spite of herself she resented any criticism of her house. She even resented the obvious truth that it was old.

"You'll never get a servant to stay in that cellar-kitchen, for one thing," said Sophia, keeping calm.

"Oh! I don't know about that! I don't know about that! That Bennion woman didn't object to it, anyway. It's all very well for you, Sophia, to talk like that. But I know Bursley perhaps better than you do." She was tart again. "And I can assure you that my house is looked upon as a very good house indeed."

"Oh! I don't say it isn't; I don't say it isn't. But you would be better away from it. Everyone says that."

"Everyone?" Constance looked up, dropping her work. "Who? Who's been talking about me?"

"Well," said Sophia, "the doctor, for instance."

"Dr Stirling? I like that! He's always saying that Bursley is one of the healthiest climates in England. He's always sticking up for Bursley."

"Dr Stirling thinks you ought to go away more—not stay always in that dark house." If Sophia had sufficiently reflected she would not have used the adjective "dark." It did not help her cause.

"Oh, does he!" Constance fairly snorted. "Well, if it's of any interest to Dr Stirling, I like my dark house."

"Hasn't he ever told you you ought to go away more?" Sophia persisted.

"He may have mentioned it," Constance reluctantly admitted.

"When he was talking to me he did a good deal more than mention it. And I've a good mind to tell you what he said."

"Do!" said Constance, politely.

"You don't realize how serious it is, I'm afraid," said Sophia. "You can't see yourself." She hesitated a moment. Her blood being stirred by Constance's peculiar inflection of the phrase "my dark house," her judgement was slightly obscured. She decided to give Constance a fairly full version of the conversation between herself and the doctor.

"It's a question of your health," she finished. "I think it's my duty to talk to you seriously, and I have done. I hope you'll take it as it's meant."

"Oh, of course!" Constance hastened to say. And she thought: "It isn't yet three months that we've been together, and she's trying already to get me under her thumb."

A pause ensued. Sophia at length said: "There's no doubt that both your sciatica and your palpitations are due to nerves. And you let your nerves get into a state because you worry over trifles. A change would do you a tremendous amount of good. It's just what you need. Really, you must admit, Constance, that the idea of living always in a place like St Luke's Square, when you are perfectly free to do what you like and go where you like—you must admit it's rather too much."

Constance put her lips together and bent over her embroidery.

"Now, what do you say?" Sophia gently entreated.

"There's some of us like Bursley, black as it is!" said Constance. And Sophia was surprised to detect tears in her sister's voice.

"Now, my dear Constance," she remonstrated.

"It's no use!" cried Constance, flinging away her work, and letting her tears flow suddenly. Her face was distorted. She was behaving just like a child. "It's no use! I've got to go back home and look after things. It's no use. Here we are pitching money about in this place. It's perfectly sinful. Drives, carriages, extras! A shilling a day extra for each dog. I never heard of such goings-on. And I'd sooner be at home. That's it. I'd sooner be at home." This was the first reference that Constance had made for a long time to the question of expense, and incomparably the most violent. It angered Sophia.

“We will count it that you are here as my guest,” said Sophia, loftily, “if that is how you look at it.”

“Oh no!” said Constance. “It isn’t the money I grudge. Oh no, we won’t.” And her tears were falling thick.

“Yes, we will,” said Sophia, coldly. “I’ve only been talking to you for your own good. I—”

“Well,” Constance interrupted her despairingly, “I wish you wouldn’t try to domineer over me!”

“Domineer!” exclaimed Sophia, aghast. “Well, Constance, I do think—”

She got up and went to her bedroom, where the dogs were imprisoned. They escaped to the stairs. She was shaking with emotion. This was what came of trying to help other people! Imagine Constance . . . ! Truly Constance was most unjust, and quite unlike her usual self! And Sophia encouraged in her breast the feeling of injustice suffered. But a voice kept saying to her: “You’ve made a mess of this. You’ve not conquered this time. You’re beaten. And the situation is unworthy of you, of both of you. Two women of fifty quarrelling like this! It’s undignified. You’ve made a mess of things.” And to strangle the voice, she did her best to encourage the feeling of injustice suffered.

“Domineer!”

And Constance was absolutely in the wrong. She had not argued at all. She had merely stuck to her idea like a mule! How difficult and painful would be the next meeting with Constance, after this grievous miscarriage!

As she was reflecting thus the door burst open, and Constance stumbled, as it were blindly, into the bedroom. She was still weeping.

“Sophia!” she sobbed, supplicatingly, and all her fat body was trembling. “You mustn’t kill me . . . I’m like that—you can’t alter me. I’m like that. I know I’m silly. But it’s no use!” She made a piteous figure.

Sophia was aware of a lump in her throat.

“It’s all right, Constance; it’s all right. I quite understand. Don’t bother any more.”

Constance, catching her breath at intervals, raised her wet, worn face and kissed her.

Sophia remembered the very words, “You can’t alter her,” which she had used in remonstrating with Cyril. And now she had been guilty of precisely the same unreason as that with which she had reproached Cyril! She was ashamed, both for herself and for Constance. Assuredly it had not been such a scene as women of their age would want to go through often. It was humiliating. She wished that it could have been blotted out as though it had never happened. Neither of them ever forgot it. They had had a lesson. And particularly Sophia had had a lesson. Having learnt, they left the Rutland, amid due ceremonies, and returned to St Luke’s Square.

CHAPTER IV

END OF SOPHIA

I

The kitchen steps were as steep, dark, and difficult as ever. Up those steps Sophia Scales, nine years older than when she had failed to persuade Constance to leave the Square, was carrying a large basket, weighted with all the heaviness of Fossette. Sophia, despite her age, climbed the steps violently, and burst with equal violence into the parlour, where she deposited the basket on the floor near the empty fireplace. She was triumphant and breathless. She looked at Constance, who had been standing near the door in the attitude of a shocked listener.

"There!" said Sophia. "Did you hear how she talked?"

"Yes," said Constance. "What shall you do?"

"Well," said Sophia. "I had a very good mind to order her out of the house at once. But then I thought I would take no notice. Her time will be up in three weeks. It's best to be indifferent. If once they see they can upset you . . . However, I wasn't going to leave Fossette down there to her tender mercies a moment longer. She's simply not looked after her at all."

Sophia went on her knees to the basket, and, pulling aside the dog's hair, round about the head, examined the skin. Fossette was a sick dog and behaved like one. Fossette, too, was nine years older, and her senility was offensive. She was to no sense a pleasant object.

"See here," said Sophia.

Constance also knelt to the basket.

"And here," said Sophia. "And here."

The dog sighed, the insincere and pity-seeking sigh of a spoilt animal. Fossette foolishly hoped by such appeals to be spared the annoying treatment prescribed for her by the veterinary surgeon.

While the sisters were coddling her, and protecting her from her own paws, and trying to persuade her that all was for the best, another aged dog wandered vaguely into the room: Spot. Spot had very few teeth, and his legs were stiff. He had only one vice, jealousy. Fearing that Fossette might be receiving the entire attention of his mistresses, he had come to inquire into the situation. When he found the justification of his gloomiest apprehensions, he nosed obstinately up to Constance, and would not be put off. In vain Constance told him at length that he was interfering with the treatment. In vain Sophia ordered him sharply to go away. He would not listen to reason, being furious with jealousy. He got his foot into the basket.

"Will you!" exclaimed Sophia angrily, and gave him a clout on his old head. He barked snappishly, and retired to the kitchen again, disillusioned, tired of the world, and nursing his terrific grievance. "I do declare," said Sophia, "that dog gets worse and worse."

Constance said nothing.

When everything was done that could be done for the aged virgin in the basket, the sisters rose from their knees, stiffly; and they began to whisper to each other about the prospects of obtaining a fresh servant. They also debated whether they could tolerate the criminal eccentricities of the present occupant of the cave for yet another three weeks. Evidently they were in the midst of a crisis. To judge from Constance's face every imaginable woe had been piled on them by destiny without the slightest regard for their powers of resistance. Her eyes had the permanent look of worry, and there was in them also something of the self-defensive. Sophia had a bellicose air, as though the creature in the cave had squarely challenged her, and she was decided to take up the challenge. Sophia's tone seemed to imply an accusation of Constance. The general tension was acute.

Then suddenly their whispers expired, and the door opened and the servant came in to lay the supper. Her nose was high, her gaze cruel, radiant, and conquering. She was a pretty and an impudent girl of about twenty-three. She knew she was torturing her old and infirm mistresses. She did not care. She did it purposely. Her motto was: War on employers, get all you can out of them, for they will get all they can out of you. On principle—the sole principle she possessed—she would not stay in a place more than six months. She

liked change. And employers did not like change. She was shameless with men. She ignored all orders as to what she was to eat and what she was not to eat. She lived up to the full resources of her employers. She could be to the last degree slatternly. Or she could be as neat as a pin, with an apron that symbolized purity and propriety, as tonight. She could be idle during a whole day, accumulating dirty dishes from morn till eve. On the other hand she could, when she chose, work with astonishing celerity and even thoroughness. In short, she was born to infuriate a mistress like Sophia and to wear out a mistress like Constance. Her strongest advantage in the struggle was that she enjoyed altercation; she revelled in a brawl; she found peace tedious. She was perfectly calculated to convince the sisters that times had worsened, and that the world would never again be the beautiful, agreeable place it once had been.

Her gestures as she laid the table were very graceful, in the pert style. She dropped forks into their appointed positions with disdain; she made slightly too much noise; when she turned she manoeuvred her swelling hips as though for the benefit of a soldier in a handsome uniform.

Nothing but the servant had been changed in that house. The harmonium on which Mr Povey used occasionally to play was still behind the door; and on the harmonium was the tea-caddy of which Mrs Baines used to carry the key on her bunch. In the corner to the right of the fireplace still hung the cupboard where Mrs Baines stored her pharmacopoeia. The rest of the furniture was arranged as it had been arranged when the death of Mrs Baines endowed Mr and Mrs Povey with all the treasures of the house at Axe. And it was as good as ever; better than ever. Dr Stirling often expressed the desire for a corner cupboard like Mrs Baines's corner cupboard. One item had been added: the "Peel" compote which Matthew Peel-Swynnerton had noticed in the dining-room of the Pension Frensham. This majestic piece, which had been reserved by Sophia in the sale of the pension, stood alone on a canterbury in the drawing-room. She had stored it, with a few other trifles, in Paris, and when she sent for it and the packing-case arrived, both she and Constance became aware that they were united for the rest of their lives. Of worldly goods, except money, securities, and clothes, that compote was practically all that Sophia owned. Happily it was a first-class item, doing no shame to the antique magnificence of the drawing-room.

In yielding to Constance's terrible inertia, Sophia had meant nevertheless to work her own will on the interior of the house. She had meant to bully Constance into modernizing the dwelling. She did bully Constance, but the house defied her. Nothing could be done to that house. If only it had had a hall or lobby a complete transformation would have been possible. But there was no access to the upper floor except through the parlour. The parlour could not therefore be turned into a kitchen and the basement suppressed, and the ladies of the house could not live entirely on the upper floor. The disposition of the rooms had to remain exactly as it had always been. There was the same draught under the door, the same darkness on the kitchen stairs, the same difficulties with tradesmen in the distant backyard, the same twist in the bedroom stairs, the same eternal ascending and descending of pails. An efficient cooking-stove, instead of the large and capacious range, alone represented the twentieth century in the fixtures of the house.

Buried at the root of the relations between the sisters was Sophia's grudge against Constance for refusing to leave the Square. Sophia was loyal. She would not consciously give with one hand while taking away with the other, and in accepting Constance's decision she honestly meant to close her eyes to its stupidity. But she could not entirely succeed. She could not avoid thinking that the angelic Constance had been strangely and monstrously selfish in refusing to quit the Square. She marvelled that a woman of Constance's sweet and calm disposition should be capable of so vast and ruthless an egotism. Constance must have known that Sophia would not leave her, and that the habitation of the Square was a continual irk to Sophia. Constance had never been able to advance a single argument for remaining in the Square. And yet she would not budge. It was so inconsistent with the rest of Constance's behaviour. See Sophia sitting primly there by the table, a woman approaching sixty, with immense experience written on the fine hardness of her worn and distinguished face! Though her hair is not yet all grey, nor her figure bowed, you would imagine that she would in her passage through the world, have learnt better than to expect a character to be consistent. But no! She was ever disappointed and hurt by Constance's inconsistency! And see Constance, stout and bowed, looking more than her age, with hair nearly white and slightly trembling hands! See that face whose mark is meekness and the spirit of conciliation, the desire for peace—you would not think that that placid soul could, while submitting to it, inly rage against the imposed weight of Sophia's individuality. "Because I wouldn't turn out of my house to please her," Constance would say to herself, "she fancies she is entitled to do just as she likes." Not often did she secretly rebel thus, but it occurred sometimes. They never quarrelled. They would have regarded separation as a disaster. Considering the difference of their lives, they agreed marvellously in their judgement of things. But that buried question of domicile prevented a complete unity between them. And its subtle effect was to influence both of them to make the worst, instead of the best, of the trifling mishaps that disturbed their tranquillity. When annoyed, Sophia would meditate upon the mere fact that they lived in the Square for no reason whatever, until it grew incredibly shocking to her. After all it was scarcely conceivable that they should be living in the very middle of a dirty, ugly, industrial town simply because Constance mulishly declined to move. Another thing that curiously exasperated both of them upon occasion was that, owing to a recurrence of her old complaint of dizziness after meals, Sophia had been strictly forbidden to drink tea, which she loved. Sophia chafed under the deprivation, and Constance's pleasure was impaired because she

had to drink it alone.

While the brazen and pretty servant, mysteriously smiling to herself, dropped food and utensils on to the table, Constance and Sophia attempted to converse with negligent ease upon indifferent topics, as though nothing had occurred that day to mar the beauty of ideal relations between employers and employed. The pretence was ludicrous. The young wench saw through it instantly, and her mysterious smile developed almost into a laugh.

“Please shut the door after you, Maud,” said Sophia as the girl picked up her empty tray.

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Maud, politely.

She went out and left the door open.

It was a defiance, offered from sheer, youthful, wanton mischief.

The sisters looked at each other, their faces gravely troubled, aghast, as though they had glimpsed the end of civilized society, as though they felt that they had lived too long into an age of decadence and open shame. Constance’s face showed despair—she might have been about to be pitched into the gutter without a friend and without a shilling—but Sophia’s had the reckless courage that disaster breeds.

Sophia jumped up, and stepped to the door. “Maud,” she called out.

No answer.

“Maud, do you hear me?”

The suspense was fearful.

Still no answer.

Sophia glanced at Constance. “Either she shuts this door, or she leaves this house at once, even if I have to fetch a policeman!”

And Sophia disappeared down the kitchen steps. Constance trembled with painful excitement. The horror of existence closed in upon her. She could imagine nothing more appalling than the pass to which they had been brought by the modern change in the lower classes.

In the kitchen, Sophia, conscious that the moment held the future of at least the next three weeks, collected her forces.

“Maud,” she said, “did you not hear me call you?”

Maud looked up from a book—doubtless a wicked book.

“No, ma’am.”

“You liar!” thought Sophia. And she said: “I asked you to shut the parlour door, and I shall be obliged if you will do so.”

Now Maud would have given a week’s wages for the moral force to disobey Sophia. There was nothing to compel her to obey. She could have trampled on the fragile and weak Sophia. But something in Sophia’s gaze compelled her to obey. She flounced; she bridled; she mumbled; she unnecessarily disturbed the venerable Spot; but she obeyed. Sophia had risked all, and she had won something.

“And you should light the gas in the kitchen,” said Sophia magnificently, as Maud followed her up the steps. “Your young eyes may be very good now, but you are not going the way to preserve them. My sister and I have often told you that we do not grudge you gas.”

With stateliness she rejoined Constance, and sat down to the cold supper. And as Maud clicked the door to, the sisters breathed relief. They envisaged new tribulations, but for a brief instant there was surcease.

Yet they could not eat. Neither of them, when it came to the point, could swallow. The day had been too exciting, too distressing. They were at the end of their resources. And they did not hide from each other that they were at the end of their resources. The illness of Fossette, without anything else, had been more than enough to ruin their tranquillity. But the illness of Fossette was as nothing to the ingenious naughtiness of the servant. Maud had a sense of temporary defeat, and was planning fresh operations; but really it was Maud who had conquered. Poor old things, they were in such a “state” that they could not eat!

“I’m not going to let her think she can spoil my appetite!” said Sophia, dauntless. Truly that woman’s spirit was unquenchable.

She cut a couple of slices off the cold fowl; she cut a tomato into slices; she disturbed the butter; she crumbled bread on the cloth, and rubbed bits of fowl over the plates, and dirtied knives and forks. Then she put the slices of fowl and bread and tomato into a piece of tissue paper, and silently went upstairs with the parcel and came down again a moment afterwards emptyhanded.

After an interval she rang the bell, and lighted the gas.

“We’ve finished, Maud. You can clear away.”

Constance thirsted for a cup of tea. She felt that a cup of tea was the one thing that would certainly keep her alive. She longed for it passionately. But she would not demand it from Maud. Nor would she mention it to Sophia, lest Sophia, flushed by the victory of the door, should incur new risks. She simply did without. On empty stomachs they tried pathetically to help each other in games of Patience. And when the blithe Maud passed through the parlour on the way to bed, she saw two dignified and apparently calm ladies, apparently absorbed in a delightful game of cards, apparently without a worry in the world. They said “Good night, Maud,” cheerfully, politely, and coldly. It was a heroic scene. Immediately afterwards Sophia carried Fossette up to her own bedroom.

The next afternoon the sisters, in the drawing-room, saw Dr Stirling's motor-car speeding down the Square. The doctor's partner, young Harrop, had died a few years before at the age of over seventy, and the practice was much larger than it had ever been, even in the time of old Harrop. Instead of two or three horses, Stirling kept a car, which was a constant spectacle in the streets of the district.

"I do hope he'll call in," said Mrs Povey, and sighed.

Sophia smiled to herself with a little scorn. She knew that Constance's desire for Dr Stirling was due simply to the need which she felt of telling someone about the great calamity that had happened to them that morning. Constance was utterly absorbed by it, in the most provincial way. Sophia had said to herself at the beginning of her sojourn in Bursley, and long afterwards, that she should never get accustomed to the exasperating provinciality of the town, exemplified by the childish preoccupation of the inhabitants with their own two-penny affairs. No characteristic of life in Bursley annoyed her more than this. None had oftener caused her to yearn in a brief madness for the desert-like freedom of great cities. But she had got accustomed to it. Indeed, she had almost ceased to notice it. Only occasionally, when her nerves were more upset than usual, did it strike her.

She went into Constance's bedroom to see whether the doctor's car halted in King Street. It did.

"He's here," she called out to Constance.

"I wish you'd go down, Sophia," said Constance. "I can't trust that minx—"

So Sophia went downstairs to superintend the opening of the door by the minx.

The doctor was radiant, according to custom.

"I thought I'd just see how that dizziness was going on," said he as he came up the steps.

"I'm glad you've come," said Sophia, confidentially. Since the first days of their acquaintance they had always been confidential. "You'll do my sister good today."

Just as Maud was closing the door a telegraph-boy arrived, with a telegram addressed to Mrs Scales. Sophia read it and then crumpled it in her hand.

"What's wrong with Mrs Povey today?" the doctor asked, when the servant had withdrawn.

"She only wants a bit of your society," said Sophia. "Will you go up? You know the way to the drawing-room. I'll follow."

As soon as he had gone she sat down on the sofa, staring out of the window. Then with a grunt: "Well, that's no use, anyway!" she went upstairs after the doctor. Already Constance had begun upon her recital.

"Yes," Constance was saying. "And when I went down this morning to keep an eye on the breakfast, I thought Spot was very quiet—" She paused. "He was dead in the drawer. She pretended she didn't know, but I'm sure she did. Nothing will convince me that she didn't poison that dog with the mice-poison we had last year. She was vexed because Sophia took her up sharply about Fossette last night, and she revenged herself on the other dog. It would just be like her. Don't tell me! I know. I should have packed her off at once, but Sophia thought better not. We couldn't *prove* anything, as Sophia says. Now, what do you think of it, doctor?"

Constance's eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Ye'd had Spot a long time, hadn't ye?" he said sympathetically.

She nodded. "When I was married," said she, "the first thing my husband did was to buy a fox-terrier, and ever since we've always had a fox-terrier in the house." This was not true, but Constance was firmly convinced of its truth.

"It's very trying," said the doctor. "I know when my Airedale died, I said to my wife I'd never have another dog—unless she could find me one that would live for ever. Ye remember my Airedale?"

"Oh, quite well!"

"Well, my wife said I should be bound to have another one sooner or later, and the sooner the better. She went straight off to Oldcastle and bought me a spaniel pup, and there was such a to-do training it that we hadn't too much time to think about Piper."

Constance regarded this procedure as somewhat callous, and she said so, tartly. Then she recommenced the tale of Spot's death from the beginning, and took it as far as his burial, that afternoon, by Mr Critchlow's manager, in the yard. It had been necessary to remove and replace paving-stones.

"Of course," said Dr Stirling, "ten years is a long time. He was an old dog. Well, you've still got the celebrated Fossette." He turned to Sophia.

"Oh yes," said Constance, perfunctorily. "Fossette's ill. The fact is that if Fossette hadn't been ill, Spot would probably have been alive and well now."

Her tone exhibited a grievance. She could not forget that Sophia had harshly dismissed Spot to the kitchen, thus practically sending him to his death. It seemed very hard to her that Fossette, whose life had once been despaired of, should continue to exist, while Spot, always healthy and unspoilt, should die untended, and by treachery. For the rest, she had never liked Fossette. On Spot's behalf she had always been jealous of Fossette.

"Probably alive and well now!" she repeated, with a peculiar accent.

Observing that Sophia maintained a strange silence, Dr Stirling suspected a slight tension in the relations of

the sisters, and he changed the subject. One of his great qualities was that he refrained from changing a subject introduced by a patient unless there was a professional reason for changing it.

"I've just met Richard Povey in the town," said he. "He told me to tell ye that he'll be round in about an hour or so to take you for a spin. He was in a new car, which he did his best to sell to me, but he didn't succeed."

"It's very kind of Dick," said Constance. "But this afternoon really we're not—"

"I'll thank ye to take it as a prescription, then," replied the doctor. "I told Dick I'd see that ye went. Splendid June weather. No dust after all that rain. It'll do ye all the good in the world. I must exercise my authority. The truth is, I've gradually been losing all control over ye. Ye do just as ye like."

"Oh, doctor, how you do run on!" murmured Constance, not quite well pleased today by his tone.

After the scene between Sophia and herself at Buxton, Constance had always, to a certain extent, in the doctor's own phrase, "got her knife into him." Sophia had, then, in a manner betrayed him. Constance and the doctor discussed that matter with frankness, the doctor humorously accusing her of being "hard" on him. Nevertheless the little cloud between them was real, and the result was often a faint captiousness on Constance's part in judging the doctor's behaviour.

"He's got a surprise for ye, has Dick!" the doctor added.

Dick Povey, after his father's death and his own partial recovery, had set up in Hanbridge as a bicycle agent. He was permanently lamed, and he hopped about with a thick stick. He had succeeded with bicycles and had taken to automobiles, and he was succeeding with automobiles. People were at first startled that he should advertise himself in the Five Towns. There was an obscure general feeling that because his mother had been a drunkard and his father a murderer, Dick Povey had no right to exist. However, when it had recovered from the shock of seeing Dick Povey's announcement of bargains in the *Signal*, the district most sensibly decided that there was no reason why Dick Povey should not sell bicycles as well as a man with normal parents. He was now supposed to be acquiring wealth rapidly. It was said that he was a marvellous chauffeur, at once daring and prudent. He had one day, several years previously, overtaken the sisters in the rural neighbourhood of Sneyd, where they had been making an afternoon excursion. Constance had presented him to Sophia, and he had insisted on driving the ladies home. They had been much impressed by his cautious care of them, and their natural prejudice against anything so new as a motor-car had been conquered instantly. Afterwards he had taken them out for occasional runs. He had a great admiration for Constance, founded on gratitude to Samuel Povey; and as for Sophia, he always said to her that she would be an ornament to any car.

"You haven't heard his latest, I suppose?" said the doctor, smiling.

"What is it?" Sophia asked, perfunctorily.

"He wants to take to ballooning. It seems he's been up once."

Constance made a deprecating noise with her lips.

"However, that's not his surprise," the doctor added, smiling again at the floor. He was sitting on the music-stool, and saying to himself, behind his mask of effulgent good-nature: "It gets more and more uphill work, cheering up these two women. I'll try them on Federation."

Federation was the name given to the scheme for blending the Five Towns into one town, which would be the twelfth largest town in the kingdom. It aroused fury in Bursley, which saw in the suggestion nothing but the extinction of its ancient glory to the aggrandizement of Hanbridge. Hanbridge had already, with the assistance of electric cars that whizzed to and fro every five minutes, robbed Bursley of two-thirds of its retail trade—as witness the steady decadence of the Square!—and Bursley had no mind to swallow the insult and become a mere ward of Hanbridge. Bursley would die fighting. Both Constance and Sophia were bitter opponents of Federation. They would have been capable of putting Federationists to the torture. Sophia in particular, though so long absent from her native town, had adopted its cause with characteristic vigour. And when Dr Stirling wished to practise his curative treat ment of taking the sisters "out of themselves," he had only to start the hare of Federation and the hunt would be up in a moment. But this afternoon he did not succeed with Sophia, and only partially with Constance. When he stated that there was to be a public meeting that very night, and that Constance as a ratepayer ought to go to it and vote, if her convictions were genuine, she received his chaff with a mere murmur to the effect that she did not think she should go. Had the man forgotten that Spot was dead? At length he became grave, and examined them both as to their ailments, and nodded his head, and looked into vacancy while meditating upon each case. And then, when he had inquired where they meant to go for their summer holidays, he departed.

"Aren't you going to see him out?" Constance whispered to Sophia, who had shaken hands with him at the drawing-room door. It was Sophia who did the running about, owing to the state of Constance's sciatic nerve. Constance had, indeed, become extraordinarily inert, leaving everything to Sophia.

Sophia shook her head. She hesitated; then approached Constance, holding out her hand and disclosing the crumpled telegram.

"Look at that!" said she.

Her face frightened Constance, who was always expectant of new anxieties and troubles. Constance straightened out the paper with difficulty, and read—

Mr Gerald Scales is dangerously ill here. Boldero, 49, Deansgate, Manchester.

All through the inexpressibly tedious and quite unnecessary call of Dr Stirling—(Why had he chosen to call just then? Neither of them was ill)—Sophia had held that telegram concealed in her hand and its information concealed in her heart. She had kept her head up, offering a calm front to the world. She had given no hint of the terrible explosion—for an explosion it was. Constance was astounded at her sister's self-control, which entirely passed her comprehension. Constance felt that worries would never cease, but would rather go on multiplying until death ended all. First, there had been the frightful worry of the servant; then the extremely distressing death and burial of Spot—and now it was Gerald Scales turning up again! With what violence was the direction of their thoughts now shifted! The wickedness of maids was a trifle; the death of pets was a trifle. But the reappearance of Gerald Scales! . . . That involved the possibility of consequences which could not even be named, so afflictive was the mere prospect to them. Constance was speechless, and she saw that Sophia was also speechless.

Of course the event had been bound to happen. People do not vanish never to be heard of again. The time surely arrives when the secret is revealed. So Sophia said to herself—now!

She had always refused to consider the effect of Gerald's reappearance. She had put the idea of it away from her, determined to convince herself that she had done with him finally and for ever. She had forgotten him. It was years since he had ceased to disturb her thoughts—many years. "He *must* be dead," she had persuaded herself. "It is inconceivable that he should have lived on and never come across me. If he had been alive and learnt that I had made money, he would assuredly have come to me. No, he must be dead!"

And he was not dead! The brief telegram overwhelmingly shocked her. Her life had been calm, regular, monotonous. And now it was thrown into an indescribable turmoil by five words of a telegram, suddenly, with no warning whatever. Sophia had the right to say to herself: "I have had my share of trouble, and more than my share!" The end of her life promised to be as awful as the beginning. The mere existence of Gerald Scales was a menace to her. But it was the simple impact of the blow that affected her supremely, beyond ulterior things. One might have pictured fate as a cowardly brute who had struck this ageing woman full in the face, a felling blow, which however had not felled her. She staggered, but she stuck on her legs. It seemed a shame—one of those crude, spectacular shames which make the blood boil—that the gallant, defenceless creature should be so maltreated by the bully, destiny.

"Oh, Sophia!" Constance moaned. "What trouble is this?"

Sophia's lip curled with a disgusted air. Under that she hid her suffering.

She had not seen him for thirty-six years. He must be over seventy years of age, and he had turned up again like a bad penny, doubtless a disgrace! What had he been doing in those thirty-six years? He was an old, enfeebled man now! He must be a pretty sight! And he lay at Manchester, not two hours away!

Whatever feelings were in Sophia's heart, tenderness was not among them. As she collected her wits from the stroke, she was principally aware of the sentiment of fear. She recoiled from the future.

"What shall you do?" Constance asked. Constance was weeping.

Sophia tapped her foot, glancing out of the window.

"Shall you go to see him?" Constance continued.

"Of course," said Sophia. "I must!"

She hated the thought of going to see him. She flinched from it. She felt herself under no moral obligation to go. Why should she go? Gerald was nothing to her, and had no claim on her of any kind. This she honestly believed. And yet she knew that she must go to him. She knew it to be impossible that she should not go.

"Now?" demanded Constance.

Sophia nodded.

"what about the trains?. . . Oh, you poor dear!" The mere idea of the journey to Manchester put Constance out of her wits, seeming a business of unparalleled complexity and difficulty.

"Would you like me to come with you?"

"Oh no! I must go by myself."

Constance was relieved by this. They could not have left the servant in the house alone, and the idea of shutting up the house without notice or preparation presented itself to Constance as too fantastic.

By a common instinct they both descended to the parlour.

"Now, what about a time-table? What about a time-table?" Constance mumbled on the stairs. She wiped her eyes resolutely. "I wonder whatever in this world has brought him at last to that Mr Boldero's in Deansgate?" she asked the walls.

As they came into the parlour, a great motor-car drove up before the door, and when the pulsations of its engines had died away, Dick Povey hobbled from the driver's seat to the pavement. In an instant he was hammering at the door in his lively style. There was no avoiding him. The door had to be opened. Sophia opened it. Dick Povey was over forty, but he looked considerably younger. Despite his lameness, and the fact that his lameness tended to induce corpulence, he had a dashing air, and his face, with its short, light moustache, was boyish. He seemed to be always upon some joyous adventure.

“Well, aunties,” he greeted the sisters, having perceived Constance behind Sophia; he often so addressed them. “Has Dr Stirling warned you that I was coming? Why haven’t you got your things on?”

Sophia observed a young woman in the car.

“Yes,” said he, following her gaze, “you may as well look. Come down, miss. Come down, Lily. You’ve got to go through with it.” The young woman, delicately confused and blushing, obeyed. “This is Miss Lily Holl,” he went on. “I don’t know whether you would remember her. I don’t think you do. It’s not often she comes to the Square. But, of course, she knows you by sight. Granddaughter of your old neighbour, Alderman Holl! We are engaged to be married, if you please.”

Constance and Sophia could not decently pour out their griefs on the top of such news. The betrothed pair had to come in and be congratulated upon their entry into the large realms of mutual love. But the sisters, even in their painful quandary, could not help noticing what a nice, quiet, ladylike girl Lily Holl was. Her one fault appeared to be that she was too quiet. Dick Povey was not the man to pass time in formalities, and he was soon urging departure.

“I’m sorry we can’t come,” said Sophia. “I’ve got to go to Manchester now. We are in great trouble.”

“Yes, in great trouble,” Constance weakly echoed.

Dick’s face clouded sympathetically. And both the affianced began to see that to which the egotism of their happiness had blinded them. They felt that long, long years had elapsed since these ageing ladies had experienced the delights which they were feeling.

“Trouble? I’m sorry to hear that!” said Dick.

“Can you tell me the trains to Manchester?” asked Sophia.

“No,” said Dick, quickly. “But I can drive you there quicker than any train, if it’s urgent. Where do you want to go to?”

“Deansgate,” Sophia faltered.

“Look here,” said Dick, “it’s half-past three. Put yourself in my hands; I’ll guarantee at Deansgate you shall be before half-past five. I’ll look after you.”

“But—”

“There isn’t any ‘but.’ I’m quite free for the afternoon and evening.”

At first the suggestion seemed absurd, especially to Constance. But really it was too tempting to be declined. While Sophia made ready for the journey, Dick and Lily Holl and Constance conversed in low, solemn tones. The pair were waiting to be enlightened as to the nature of the trouble; Constance, however, did not enlighten them. How could Constance say to them: “Sophia has a husband that she hasn’t seen for thirty-six years, and he’s dangerously ill, and they’ve telegraphed for her to go?” Constance could not. It did not even occur to Constance to order a cup of tea.

III

Dick Povey kept his word. At a quarter past five he drew up in front of No. 49 Deansgate, Manchester. “There you are!” he said, not without pride. “Now, we’ll come back in about a couple of hours or so, just to take your orders, whatever they are.” He was very comforting, with his suggestion that in him Sophia had a sure support in the background.

Without many words Sophia went straight into the shop. It looked like a jeweller’s shop, and a shop for bargains generally. Only the conventional sign over a side-entrance showed that at heart it was a pawnbroker’s. Mr Till Boldero did a nice business in the Five Towns, and in other centres near Manchester, by selling silver-ware second-hand, or nominally second-hand, to persons who wished to make presents to other persons or to themselves. He would send anything by post on approval. Occasionally he came to the Five Towns, and he had once, several years before, met Constance. They had talked. He was the son of a cousin of the late great and wealthy Boldero, sleeping partner in Birkinshaws, and Gerald’s uncle. It was from Constance that he had learnt of Sophia’s return to Bursley. Constance had often remarked to Sophia what a superior man Mr Till Boldero was.

The shop was narrow and lofty. It seemed like a menagerie for trapped silver-ware. In glass cases right up to the dark ceiling silver vessels and instruments of all kinds lay confined. The top of the counter was a glass prison containing dozens of gold watches, together with snuff-boxes, enamels, and other antiquities. The front of the counter was also glazed, showing vases and large pieces of porcelain. A few pictures in heavy gold frames were perched about. There was a case of umbrellas with elaborate handles and rich tassels. There were a couple of statuettes. The counter, on the customer’s side, ended in a glass screen on which were the words “Private Office.” On the seller’s side the prospect was closed by a vast safe. A tall young man was fumbling in this safe. Two women sat on customers’ chairs, leaning against the crystal counter. The young man came towards them from the safe, bearing a tray.

“How much is that goblet?” asked one of the women, raising her parasol dangerously among such fragility and pointing to one object among many in a case high up from the ground.

“That, madam?”

“Yes.”

“Thirty-five pounds.”

The young man disposed his tray on the counter. It was packed with more gold watches, adding to the extraordinary glitter and shimmer of the shop. He chose a small watch from the regiment.

“Now, this is something I can recommend,” he said. “It’s made by Cuthbert Butler of Blackburn. I can guarantee you that for five years.” He spoke as though he were the accredited representative of the Bank of England, with calm and absolute assurance.

The effect upon Sophia was mysteriously soothing. She felt that she was among honest men. The young man raised his head towards her with a questioning, deferential gesture.

“Can I see Mr Boldero?” she asked. “Mrs Scales.”

The young man’s face changed instantly to a sympathetic comprehension.

“Yes, madam. I’ll fetch him at once,” said he, and he disappeared behind the safe. The two customers discussed the watch. Then the door opened in the glass screen, and a portly, middle-aged man showed himself. He was dressed in blue broadcloth, with a turned-down collar and a small black tie. His waistcoat displayed a plain but heavy gold watch-chain, and his cuff-links were of plain gold. His eye-glasses were gold-rimmed. He had grey hair, beard, and moustache, but on the backs of his hands grew a light brown hair. His appearance was strangely mild, dignified, and confidence-inspiring. He was, in fact, one of the most respected tradesmen in Manchester.

He peered forward, looking over his eye-glasses, which he then took off, holding them up in the air by their short handle. Sophia had approached him.

“Mrs Scales?” he said, in a very quiet, very benevolent voice. Sophia nodded. “Please come this way.” He took her hand, squeezing it commiseratingly, and drew her into the sanctum. “I didn’t expect you so soon,” he said. “I looked up the trains, and I didn’t see how you could get here before six.”

Sophia explained.

He led her farther, through the private office, into a sort of parlour, and asked her to sit down. And he too sat down. Sophia waited, as it were, like a suitor.

“I’m afraid I’ve got bad news for you, Mrs Scales,” he said, still in that mild, benevolent voice.

“He’s dead?” Sophia asked.

Mr Till Boldero nodded. “He’s dead. I may as well tell you that he had passed away before I telegraphed. It all happened very, very suddenly.” He paused. “Very, very suddenly!”

“Yes,” said Sophia, weakly. She was conscious of a profound sadness which was not grief, though it resembled grief. And she had also a feeling that she was responsible to Mr Till Boldero for anything untoward that might have occurred to him by reason of Gerald.

“Yes,” said Mr Till Boldero, deliberately and softly. “He came in last night just as we were closing. We had very heavy rain here. I don’t know how it was with you. He was wet, in a dreadful state, simply dreadful. Of course, I didn’t recognize him. I’d never seen him before, so far as my recollection goes. He asked me if I was the son of Mr Till Boldero that had this shop in 1866. I said I was. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘you’re the only connexion I’ve got. My name’s Gerald Scales. My mother was your father’s cousin. Can you do anything for me?’ he says. I could see he was ill. I had him in here. When I found he couldn’t eat nor drink I thought I’d happen better send for th’ doctor. The doctor got him to bed. He passed away at one o’clock this afternoon. I was very sorry my wife wasn’t here to look after things a bit better. But she’s at Southport, not well at all.”

“What was it?” Sophia asked briefly.

Mr Boldero indicated the enigmatic. “Exhaustion, I suppose,” he replied.

“He’s here?” demanded Sophia, lifting her eyes to possible bed-rooms.

“Yes,” said Mr Boldero. “I suppose you would wish to see him?”

“Yes,” said Sophia. “You haven’t seen him for a long time, your sister told me?” Mr Boldero murmured, sympathetically.

“Not since ’seventy,” said Sophia.

“Eh, dear! Eh, dear!” ejaculated Mr Boldero. “I fear it’s been a sad business for ye, Mrs Scales. Not since ‘seventy!” He sighed. “You must take it as well as you can. I’m not one as talks much, but I sympathize with you. I do that! I wish my wife had been here to receive you.”

Tears came into Sophia’s eyes.

“Nay, nay!” he said. “You must bear up now!”

“It’s you that make me cry,” said Sophia, gratefully. “You were very good to take him in. It must have been exceedingly trying for you.”

“Oh,” he protested, “you mustn’t talk like that. I couldn’t leave a Boldero on the pavement, and an old man at that! . . . Oh, to think that if he’d only managed to please his uncle he might ha’ been one of the richest men in Lancashire. But then there’d ha’ been no Boldero Institute at Strangeways!” he added.

They both sat silent a moment.

“Will you come now? Or will you wait a bit?” asked Mr Boldero, gently. “Just as you wish. I’m sorry as my wife’s away, that I am!”

“I’ll come now,” said Sophia, firmly. But she was stricken.

He conducted her up a short, dark flight of stairs which gave on a passage, and at the end of the passage

was a door ajar. He pushed the door open.

"I'll leave you for a moment," he said, always in the same very restrained tone. "You'll find me downstairs, there, if you want me." And he moved away with hushed, deliberate tread.

Sophia went into the room, of which the white blind was drawn. She appreciated Mr Boldero's consideration in leaving her. She was trembling. But when she saw, in the pale gloom, the face of an aged man peeping out from under a white sheet on a naked mattress, she started back, trembling no more—rather transfixed into an absolute rigidity. That was no conventional, expected shock that she had received. It was a genuine unforeseen shock, the most violent that she had ever had. In her mind she had not pictured Gerald as a very old man. She knew that he was old; she had said to herself that he must be very old, well over seventy. But she had not pictured him. This face on the bed was painfully, pitiably old. A withered face, with the shiny skin all drawn into wrinkles! The stretched skin under the jaw was like the skin of a plucked fowl. The cheek-bones stood up, and below them were deep hollows, almost like egg-cups. A short, scraggy white beard covered the lower part of the face. The hair was scanty, irregular, and quite white; a little white hair grew in the ears. The shut mouth obviously hid toothless gums, for the lips were sucked in. The eyelids were as if pasted down over the eyes, fitting them like kid. All the skin was extremely pallid; it seemed brittle. The body, whose outlines were clear under the sheet, was very small, thin, shrunk, pitiable as the face. And on the face was a general expression of final fatigue, of tragic and acute exhaustion; such as made Sophia pleased that the fatigue and exhaustion had been assuaged in rest, while all the time she kept thinking to herself horribly: "Oh! how tired he must have been!"

Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion, uncoloured by any moral or religious quality. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life, nor that he was a shame to his years and to her. The manner of his life was of no importance. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. Youth and vigour always came to that. Everything came to that. He had ill-treated her; he had abandoned her; he had been a devious rascal; but how trivial were such accusations against him! The whole of her huge and bitter grievance against him fell to pieces and crumbled. She saw him young, and proud, and strong, as for instance when he had kissed her lying on the bed in that London hotel—she forgot the name—in 1866; and now he was old, and worn, and horrible, and dead. It was the riddle of life that was puzzling and killing her. By the corner of her eye, reflected in the mirror of a wardrobe near the bed, she glimpsed a tall, forlorn woman, who had once been young and now was old; who had once exulted in abundant strength, and trodden proudly on the neck of circumstance, and now was old. He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. "Yet a little while," she thought, "and I shall be lying on a bed like that! And what shall I have lived for? What is the meaning of it?" The riddle of life itself was killing her, and she seemed to drown in a sea of inexpressible sorrow.

Her memory wandered hopelessly among those past years. She saw Chirac with his wistful smile. She saw him whipped over the roof of the Gare du Nord at the tail of a balloon. She saw old Niepce. She felt his lecherous arm round her. She was as old now as Niepce had been then. Could she excite lust now? Ah! the irony of such a question! To be young and seductive, to be able to kindle a man's eye—that seemed to her the sole thing desirable. Once she had been so! . . . Niepce must certainly have been dead for years. Niepce, the obstinate and hopeful voluptuary, was nothing but a few bones in a coffin now!

She was acquainted with affliction in that hour. All that she had previously suffered sank into insignificance by the side of that suffering.

She turned to the veiled window and idly pulled the blind and looked out. Huge red and yellow cars were swimming in thunder along Deansgate; lorries jolted and rattled; the people of Manchester hurried along the pavements, apparently unconscious that all their doings were vain. Yesterday he too had been in Deansgate, hungry for life, hating the idea of death! What a figure he must have made! Her heart dissolved in pity for him. She dropped the blind.

"My life has been too terrible!" she thought. "I wish I was dead. I have been through too much. It is monstrous, and I cannot stand it. I do not want to die, but I wish I was dead."

There was a discreet knock on the door.

"Come in," she said, in a calm, resigned, cheerful voice. The sound had recalled her with the swiftness of a miracle to the unconquerable dignity of human pride.

Mr Till Boldero entered.

"I should like you to come downstairs and drink a cup of tea," he said. He was a marvel of tact and good nature. "My wife is unfortunately not here, and the house is rather at sixes and sevens; but I have sent out for some tea."

She followed him downstairs into the parlour. He poured out a cup of tea.

"I was forgetting," she said. "I am forbidden tea. I mustn't drink it."

She looked at the cup, tremendously tempted. She longed for tea. An occasional transgression could not harm her. But no! She would not drink it

"Then what can I get you?"

"If I could have just milk and water," she said meekly.

Mr Boldero emptied the cup into the slop basin, and began to fill it again.

"Did he tell you anything?" she asked, after a considerable silence.

"Nothing," said Mr Boldero in his low, soothing tones. "Nothing except that he had come from Liverpool. Judging from his shoes I should say he must have walked a good bit of the way."

"At his age!" murmured Sophia, touched.

"Yes," sighed Mr Boldero. "He must have been in great straits. You know, he could scarcely talk at all. By the way, here are his clothes. I have had them put aside."

Sophia saw a small pile of clothes on a chair. She examined the suit; which was still damp, and its woeful shabbiness pained her. The linen collar was nearly black, its stud of bone. As for the boots, she had noticed such boots on the feet of tramps. She wept now. These were the clothes of him who had once been a dandy living at the rate of fifty pounds a week.

"No luggage or anything, of course?" she muttered.

"No," said Mr Boldero. "In the pockets there was nothing whatever but this."

He went to the mantelpiece and picked up a cheap, cracked letter case, which Sophia opened. In it were a visiting card—"Senorita Clemenzia Borja"—and a bill-head of the Hotel of the Holy Spirit, Concepcion del Uruguay, on the back of which a lot of figures had been scrawled.

"One would suppose," said Mr Boldero, "that he had come from South America."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

Gerald's soul had not been compelled to abandon much in the haste of its flight.

A servant announced that Mrs Scales's friends were waiting for her outside in the motor-car. Sophia glanced at Mr Till Boldero with an exacerbated anxiety on her face.

"Surely they don't expect me to go back with them tonight!" she said. "And look at all there is to be done!"

Mr Till Boldero's kindness was then redoubled. "You can do nothing for *him* now," he said. "Tell me your wishes about the funeral. I will arrange everything. Go back to your sister tonight. She will be nervous about you. And return tomorrow or the day after . . . No! it's no trouble, I assure you!"

She yielded.

Thus towards eight o'clock, when Sophia had eaten a little under Mr Boldero's superintendence, and the pawnshop was shut up, the motor-car started again for Bursley, Lily Holl being beside her lover and Sophia alone in the body of the car. Sophia had told them nothing of the nature of her mission. She was incapable of talking to them. They saw that she was in a condition of serious mental disturbance. Under cover of the noise of the car, Lily said to Dick that she was sure Mrs Scales was ill, and Dick, putting his lips together, replied that he meant to be in King Street at nine-thirty at the latest. From time to time Lily surreptitiously glanced at Sophia—a glance of apprehensive inspection—or smiled at her silently; and Sophia vaguely responded to the smile.

In half an hour they had escaped from the ring of Manchester and were on the county roads of Cheshire, polished, flat, sinuous. It was the season of the year when there is no night—only daylight and twilight; when the last silver of dusk remains obstinately visible for hours. And in the open country, under the melancholy arch of evening, the sadness of the earth seemed to possess Sophia anew. Only then did she realize the intensity of the ordeal through which she was passing.

To the south of Congleton one of the tyres softened, immediately after Dick had lighted his lamps. He stopped the car and got down again. They were two miles from Astbury, the nearest village. He had just, with the resignation of experience, reached for the tool-bag, when Lily exclaimed: "Is she asleep, or what?" Sophia was not asleep, but she was apparently not conscious.

It was a difficult and a trying situation for two lovers. Their voices changed momentarily to the tone of alarm and consternation, and then grew firm again. Sophia showed life but not reason. Lily could feel the poor old lady's heart.

"Well, there's nothing for it!" said Dick, briefly, when all their efforts failed to rouse her.

"What—shall you do?"

"Go straight home as quick as I can on three tyres. We must get her over to this side, and you must hold her. Like that we shall keep the weight off the other side."

He pitched back the tool-bag into its box. Lily admired his decision.

It was in this order, no longer under the spell of the changing beauty of nocturnal landscapes, that they finished the journey. Constance had opened the door before the car came to a stop in the gloom of King Street. The young people considered that she bore the shock well, though the carrying into the house of Sophia's inert, twitching body, with its hat forlornly awry, was a sight to harrow a soul sturdier than Constance.

When that was done, Dick said curtly: "I'm off. You stay here, of course."

"Where are you going?" asked Lily.

"Doctor!" snapped Dick, hobbling rapidly down the steps.

The extraordinary violence of the turn in affairs was what chiefly struck Constance, though it did not overwhelm her. Less than twelve hours before—nay, scarcely six hours before—she and Sophia had been living their placid and monotonous existence, undisturbed by anything worse then the indisposition or death of dogs, or the perversity of a servant. And now, the menacing Gerald Scales having reappeared, Sophia's form lay mysterious and affrightening on the sofa; and she and Lily Holl, a girl whom she had not met till that day, were staring at Sophia side by side, intimately sharing the same alarm. Constance rose to the crisis. She no longer had Sophia's energy and decisive peremptoriness to depend on, and the Baines in her was awakened. All her daily troubles sank away to their proper scale of unimportance. Neither the young woman nor the old one knew what to do. They could loosen clothes, vainly offer restoratives to the smitten mouth: that was all. Sophia was not unconscious, as could be judged from her eyes; but she could not speak, nor make signs; her body was frequently convulsed. So the two women waited, and the servant waited in the background. The sight of Sophia had effected an astonishing transformation in Maud. Maud was a changed girl. Constance could not recognize, in her eager deferential anxiety to be of use, the pert naughtiness of the minx. She was altered as a wanton of the middle ages would have been altered by some miraculous visitation. It might have been the turning point in Maud's career!

Dr Stirling arrived in less than ten minutes. Dick Povey had had the wit to look for him at the Federation meeting in the Town Hall. And the advent of the doctor and Dick, noisily, at break-neck speed in the car, provided a second sensation. The doctor inquired quickly what had occurred. Nobody could tell him anything. Constance had already confided to Lily Holl the reason of the visit to Manchester; but that was the extent of her knowledge. Not a single person in Bursley, except Sophia, knew what had happened in Manchester. But Constance conjectured that Gerald Scales was dead—or Sophia would never have returned so soon. Then the doctor suggested that on the contrary Gerald Scales might be out of danger. And all then pictured to themselves this troubling Gerald Scales, this dark and sinister husband that had caused such a violent upheaval.

Meanwhile the doctor was at work. He sent Dick Povey to knock up Critchlow's, if the shop should be closed, and obtain a drug. Then, after a time, he lifted Sophia, just as she was, like a bundle on his shoulder, and carried her single-handed upstairs to the second floor. He had recently been giving a course of instruction to enthusiasts of the St John Ambulance Association in Bursley. The feat had an air of the superhuman. Above all else it remained printed on Constance's mind: the burly doctor treading delicately and carefully on the crooked, creaking stairs, his precautions against damaging Sophia by brusque contacts, his stumble at the two steps in the middle of the corridor; Sophia's horribly limp head and loosened hair; and then the tender placing of her on the bed, and the doctor's long breath and flourish of his large handkerchief—all that under the crude lights and shadows of gas-jets! The doctor was nonplussed. Constance gave a second-hand account of Sophia's original attack in Paris, roughly as she had heard it from Sophia. He at once said that it could not have been what the French doctor had said it was. Constance shrugged her shoulders. She was not surprised. For her there was necessarily something of the charlatan about a French doctor. She said she only knew what Sophia had told her. After a time Dr Stirling determined to try electricity, and Dick Povey drove him up to the surgery to fetch his apparatus. The women were left alone again. Constance was very deeply impressed by Lily Holl's sensible, sympathetic attitude. "Whatever I should have done without Miss Lily I don't know!" she used to exclaim afterwards. Even Maud was beyond praise. It seemed to be the middle of the night when Dr Stirling came back, but it was barely eleven o'clock, and people were only just returning from Hanbridge Theatre and Hanbridge Music Hall. The use of the electrical apparatus was a dead spectacle. Sophia's inertness under it was agonizing. They waited, as it were, breathless for the result. And there was no result. Both injections and electricity had entirely failed to influence the paralysis of Sophia's mouth and throat. Everything had failed. "Nothing to do but wait a bit!" said the doctor quietly. They waited in the chamber. Sophia seemed to be in a kind of coma. The distortion of her handsome face was more marked as time passed. The doctor spoke now and then in a low voice. He said that the attack had ultimately been determined by cold produced by rapid motion in the automobile. Dick Povey whispered that he must run over to Hanbridge and let Lily's parents know that there was no cause for alarm on her account, and that he would return at once. He was very devoted. On the landing outside the bed-room, the doctor murmured to him: "U.P." And Dick nodded. They were great friends.

At intervals the doctor, who never knew when he was beaten, essayed new methods of dealing with Sophia's case. New symptoms followed. It was half-past twelve when, after gazing with prolonged intensity at the patient, and after having tested her mouth and heart, he rose slowly and looked at Constance.

"It's over?" said Constance.

And he very slightly moved his head. "Come downstairs, please," he enjoined her, in a pause that ensued. Constance was amazingly courageous. The doctor was very solemn and very kind; Constance had never before seen him to such heroic advantage. He led her with infinite gentleness out of the room. There was nothing to stay for; Sophia had gone. Constance wanted to stay by Sophia's body; but it was the rule that the stricken should be led away, the doctor observed this classic rule, and Constance felt that he was right and that she must obey. Lily Holl followed. The servant, learning the truth by the intuition accorded to primitive natures,

burst into loud sobs, yelling that Sophia had been the most excellent mistress that servant ever had. The doctor angrily told her not to stand blubbering there, but to go into her kitchen and shut the door if she couldn't control herself. All his accumulated nervous agitation was discharged on Maud like a thunderclap. Constance continued to behave wonderfully. She was the admiration of the doctor and Lily Holl. Then Dick Povey came back. It was settled that Lily should pass the night with Constance. At last the doctor and Dick departed together, the doctor undertaking the mortuary arrangements. Maud was hunted to bed.

Early in the morning Constance rose up from her own bed. It was five o'clock, and there had been daylight for two hours already. She moved noiselessly and peeped over the foot of the bed at the sofa. Lily was quietly asleep there, breathing with the softness of a child. Lily would have deemed that she was a very mature woman, who had seen life and much of it. Yet to Constance her face and attitude had the exquisite quality of a child's. She was not precisely a pretty girl, but her features, the candid expression of her disposition, produced an impression that was akin to that of beauty. Her abandonment was complete. She had gone through the night unscathed, and was now renewing herself in calm, oblivious sleep. Her ingenuous girlishness was apparent then. It seemed as if all her wise and sweet behaviour of the evening could have been nothing but so many imitative gestures. It seemed impossible that a being so young and fresh could have really experienced the mood of which her gestures had been the expression. Her strong virginal simplicity made Constance vaguely sad for her.

Creeping out of the room, Constance climbed to the second floor in her dressing-grown, and entered the other chamber. She was obliged to look again upon Sophia's body. Incredible swiftness of calamity! Who could have foreseen it? Constance was less desolated than numbed. She was as yet only touching the fringe of her bereavement. She had not begun to think of herself. She was drenched, as she gazed at Sophia's body, not by pity for herself, but by compassion for the immense disaster of her sister's life. She perceived fully now for the first time the greatness of that disaster. Sophia's charm and Sophia's beauty—what profit had they been to their owner? She saw pictures of Sophia's career, distorted and grotesque images formed in her untravelled mind from Sophia's own rare and compressed recitals. What a career! A brief passion, and then nearly thirty years in a boarding-house! And Sophia had never had a child; had never known either the joy or the pain of maternity. She had never even had a true home till, in all her sterile splendour, she came to Bursley. And she had ended—thus! This was the piteous, ignominious end of Sophia's wondrous gifts of body and soul. Hers had not been a life at all. And the reason? It is strange how fate persists in justifying the harsh generalizations of Puritan morals, of the morals in which Constance had been brought up by her stern parents! Sophia had sinned. It was therefore inevitable that she should suffer. An adventure such as she had in wicked and capricious pride undertaken with Gerald Scales, could not conclude otherwise than it had concluded. It could have brought nothing but evil. There was no getting away from these verities, thought Constance. And she was to be excused for thinking that all modern progress and cleverness was as naught, and that the world would be forced to return upon its steps and start again in the path which it had left.

Up to within a few days of her death people had been wont to remark that Mrs Scales looked as young as ever, and that she was as bright and as energetic as ever. And truly, regarding Sophia from a little distance—that handsome oval, that erect carriage of a slim body, that challenging eye!—no one would have said that she was in her sixtieth year. But look at her now, with her twisted face, her sightless orbs, her worn skin—she did not seem sixty, but seventy! She was like something used, exhausted, and thrown aside! Yes, Constance's heart melted in an anguished pity for that stormy creature. And mingled with the pity was a stern recognition of the handiwork of divine justice. To Constance's lips came the same phrase as had come to the lips of Samuel Povey on a different occasion: God is not mocked! The ideas of her parents and her grandparents had survived intact in Constance. It is true that Constance's father would have shuddered in Heaven could he have seen Constance solitarily playing cards of a night. But in spite of cards, and of a son who never went to chapel, Constance, under the various influences of destiny, had remained essentially what her father had been. Not in her was the force of evolution manifest. There are thousands such.

Lily, awake, and reclothed with that unreal mien of a grown and comprehending woman, stepped quietly into the room, searching for the poor old thing, Constance. The layer-out had come.

By the first post was delivered a letter addressed to Sophia by Mr Till Boldero. From its contents the death of Gerald Scales was clear. There seemed then to be nothing else for Constance to do. What had to be done was done for her. And stronger wills than hers put her to bed. Cyril was telegraphed for. Mr Critchlow called, Mrs Critchlow following—a fussy infliction, but useful in certain matters. Mr Critchlow was not allowed to see Constance. She could hear his high grating voice in the corridor. She had to lie calm, and the sudden tranquillity seemed strange after the feverish violence of the night. Only twenty-four hours since, and she had been worrying about the death of a dog! With a body crying for sleep, she dozed off, thoughts of the mystery of life merging into the incoherence of dreams.

The news was abroad in the Square before nine o'clock. There were persons who had witnessed the arrival of the motor-car, and the transfer of Sophia to the house. Untruthful rumours had spread as to the manner of Gerald Scales's death. Some said that he had dramatically committed suicide. But the town, though titillated, was not moved as it would have been moved by a similar event twenty years, or even ten years earlier. Times had changed in Bursley. Bursley was more sophisticated than in the old days.

Constance was afraid lest Cyril, despite the seriousness of the occasion, might exhibit his customary tardiness in coming. She had long since learnt not to rely upon him. But he came the same evening. His behaviour was in every way perfect. He showed quiet but genuine grief for the death of his aunt, and he was a model of consideration for his mother. Further, he at once assumed charge of all the arrangements, in regard both to Sophia and to her husband. Constance was surprised at the ease which he displayed in the conduct of practical affairs, and the assurance with which he gave orders. She had never seen him direct anything before. He said, indeed, that he had never directed anything before, but that there appeared to him to be no difficulties. Whereas Constance had figured a tiresome series of varied complications. As to the burial of Sophia, Cyril was vigorously in favour of an absolutely private funeral; that is to say, a funeral at which none but himself should be present. He seemed to have a passionate objection to any sort of parade. Constance agreed with him. But she said that it would be impossible not to invite Mr Critchlow, Sophia's trustee, and that if Mr Critchlow were invited certain others must be invited. Cyril asked: "Why impossible?" Constance said: "Because it *would* be impossible. Because Mr Critchlow would be hurt." Cyril asked: "what does it matter if he is hurt?" and suggested that Mr Critchlow would get over his damage. Constance grew more serious. The discussion threatened to be warm. Suddenly Cyril yielded. "All right, Mrs Plover, all right! It shall be exactly as you choose," he said, in a gentle, humouring tone. He had not called her "Mrs Plover" for years. She thought the hour badly chosen for verbal pleasantry, but he was so kind that she made no complaint. Thus there were six people at Sophia's funeral, including Mr Critchlow. No refreshments were offered. The mourners separated at the church. When both funerals were accomplished Cyril sat down and played the harmonium softly, and said that it had kept well in tune. He was extraordinarily soothing.

He had now reached the age of thirty-three. His habits were as industrious as ever, his preoccupation with his art as keen. But he had achieved no fame, no success. He earned nothing, living in comfort on an allowance from his mother. He seldom spoke of his plans and never of his hopes. He had in fact settled down into a dilettante, having learnt gently to scorn the triumphs which he lacked the force to win. He imagined that industry and a regular existence were sufficient justification in themselves for any man's life. Constance had dropped the habit of expecting him to astound the world. He was rather grave and precise in manner, courteous and tepid, with a touch of condescension towards his environment; as though he were continually permitting the perspicacious to discern that he had nothing to learn—if the truth were known! His humour had assumed a modified form. He often smiled to himself. He was unexceptionable.

On the day after Sophia's funeral he set to work to design a simple stone for his aunt's tomb. He said he could not tolerate the ordinary gravestone, which always looked, to him, as if the wind might blow it over, thus negativing the idea of solidity. His mother did not in the least understand him. She thought the lettering of his tombstone affected and finicking. But she let it pass without comment, being secretly very flattered that he should have deigned to design a stone at all.

Sophia had left all her money to Cyril, and had made him the sole executor of her will. This arrangement had been agreed with Constance. The sisters thought it was the best plan. Cyril ignored Mr Critchlow entirely, and went to a young lawyer at Hanbridge, a friend of his and of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton's. Mr Critchlow, aged and unaccustomed to interference, had to render accounts of his trusteeship to this young man, and was incensed. The estate was proved at over thirty-five thousand pounds. In the main, Sophia had been careful, and had even been parsimonious. She had often told Constance that they ought to spend money much more freely, and she had had a few brief fits of extravagance. But the habit of stern thrift, begun in 1870 and practised without any intermission till she came to England in 1897, had been too strong for her theories. The squandering of money pained her. And she could not, in her age, devise expensive tastes.

Cyril showed no emotion whatever on learning himself the inheritor of thirty-five thousand pounds. He did not seem to care. He spoke of the sum as a millionaire might have spoken of it. In justice to him it is to be said that he cared nothing for wealth, except in so far as wealth could gratify his eye and ear trained to artistic voluptuousness. But for his mother's sake, and for the sake of Bursley, he might have affected a little satisfaction. His mother was somewhat hurt. His behaviour caused her to revert in meditation again and again to the futility of Sophia's career, and the waste of her attributes. She had grown old and hard in joyless years in order to amass this money which Cyril would spend coldly and ungratefully, never thinking of the immense effort and endless sacrifice which had gone to its collection. He would spend it as carelessly as though he had picked it up in the street. As the days went by and Constance realized her own grief, she also realized more and more the completeness of the tragedy of Sophia's life. Headstrong Sophia had deceived her mother, and for the deception had paid with thirty years of melancholy and the entire frustration of her proper destiny.

After haunting Bursley for a fortnight in elegant black, Cyril said, without any warning, one night: "I must go the day after tomorrow, mater." And he told her of a journey to Hungary which he had long since definitely planned with Matthew Peel-Swynnerton, and which could not be postponed, as it comprised "business." He had hitherto breathed no word of this. He was as secretive as ever. As to her holiday, he suggested that she should arrange to go away with the Holls and Dick Povey. He approved of Lily Holl and of Dick Povey. Of Dick Povey he said: "He's one of the most remarkable chaps in the Five Towns." And he had the air of having made Dick's reputation. Constance, knowing there was no appeal, accepted the sentence of loneliness. Her health was singularly good.

When he was gone she said to herself: “Scarcely a fortnight and Sophia was here at this table!” She would remember every now and then, with a faint shock, that poor, proud, masterful Sophia was dead.

CHAPTER V

END OF CONSTANCE

I

When, on a June afternoon about twelve months later, Lily Holl walked into Mrs Povey’s drawing-room overlooking the Square, she found a calm, somewhat optimistic old lady—older than her years, which were little more than sixty—whose chief enemies were sciatica and rheumatism. The sciatica was a dear enemy of long standing, always affectionately referred to by the forgiving Constance as “*my* sciatica”; the rheumatism was a newcomer, unprivileged, spoken of by its victim apprehensively and yet disdainfully as “this *rheumatism*.” Constance was now very stout. She sat in a low easy-chair between the oval table and the window, arrayed in black silk. As the girl Lily came in, Constance lifted her head with a bland smile, and Lily kissed her, contentedly. Lily knew that she was a welcome visitor. These two had become as intimate as the difference between their ages would permit; of the two, Constance was the more frank. Lily as well as Constance was in mourning. A few months previously her aged grandfather, “Holl, the grocer,” had died. The second of his two sons, Lily’s father, had then left the business established by the brothers at Hanbridge in order to manage, for a time, the parent business in St Luke’s Square. Alderman Holl’s death had delayed Lily’s marriage. Lily took tea with Constance, or at any rate paid a call, four or five times a week. She listened to Constance.

Everybody considered that Constance had “come splendidly through” the dreadful affair of Sophia’s death. Indeed, it was observed that she was more philosophic, more cheerful, more sweet, than she had been for many years. The truth was that, though her bereavement had been the cause of a most genuine and durable sorrow, it had been a relief to her. When Constance was over fifty, the energetic and masterful Sophia had burst in upon her lethargic tranquillity and very seriously disturbed the flow of old habits. Certainly Constance had fought Sophia on the main point, and won; but on a hundred minor points she had either lost or had not fought. Sophia had been “too much” for Constance, and it had been only by a wearying expenditure of nervous force that Constance had succeeded in holding a small part of her own against the unconscious domination of Sophia. The death of Mrs Scales had put an end to all strain, and Constance had been once again mistress in Constance’s house. Constance would never have admitted these facts, even to herself, and no one would ever have dared to suggest them to her. For with all her temperamental mildness she had her formidable side.

She was slipping a photograph into a plush-covered photograph album.

“More photographs?” Lily questioned. She had almost exactly the same benignant smile that Constance had. She seemed to be the personification of gentleness—one of those feather-beds that some capricious men occasionally have the luck to marry. She was capable, with a touch of honest, simple stupidity. All her character was displayed in the tone in which she said: “More photographs?” It showed an eager, responsive sympathy with Constance’s cult for photographs, also a slight personal fondness for photographs, also a dim perception that a cult for photographs might be carried to the ridiculous, and a kind desire to hide all trace of this perception. The voice was thin, and matched the pale complexion of her delicate face.

Constance’s eyes had a quizzical gleam behind her spectacles as she silently held up the photograph for Lily’s inspection.

Lily, sitting down, lowered the corners of her soft lips when she beheld the photograph, and nodded her head several times, scarce perceptibly.

“Her ladyship has just given it to me,” whispered Constance.

“Indeed!” said Lily, with an extraordinary accent.

Her ladyship” was the last and best of Constance’s servants, a really excellent creature of thirty, who had known misfortune, and who must assuredly have been sent to Constance by the old watchful Providence. They “got on together” nearly perfectly. Her name was Mary. After ten years of turmoil, Constance in the matter of servants was now at rest.

“Yes,” said Constance. “She’s named it to me several times—about having her photograph taken, and last week I let her go. I told you, didn’t I? I always consider her in every way, all her little fancies and everything. And the copies came today. I wouldn’t hurt her feelings for anything. You may be sure she’ll take a look into the album next time she cleans the room.”

Constance and Lily exchanged a glance agreeing that Constance had affably stretched a point in deciding to put the photograph of a servant between the same covers with photographs of her family and friends. It was doubtful whether such a thing had ever been done before.

One photograph usually leads to another, and one photograph album to another photograph album.

“Pass me that album on the second shelf of the Canterbury, my dear,” said Constance.

Lily rose vivaciously, as though to see the album on the second shelf of the Canterbury had been the ambition of her life.

They sat side by side at the table, Lily turning over the pages. Constance, for all her vast bulk, continually made little nervous movements. Occasionally she would sniff and occasionally a mysterious noise would occur in her chest; she always pretended that this noise was a cough, and would support the pretence by emitting a real cough immediately after it.

“Why!” exclaimed Lily. “Have I seen that before?”

“I don’t know, my dear,” said Constance, “*Have* you?”

It was a photograph of Sophia taken a few years previously by “a very nice gentleman,” whose acquaintance the sisters had made during a holiday at Harrogate. It portrayed Sophia on a knoll, fronting the weather.

“It’s Mrs Scales to the life—I can see that,” said Lily.

“Yes,” said Constance. “Whenever there was a wind she always stood like that, and took long deep breaths of it.”

This recollection of one of Sophia’s habits recalled the whole woman to Constance’s memory, and drew a picture of her character for the girl who had scarcely known her.

“It’s not like ordinary photographs. There’s something special about it,” said Lily, enthusiastically. “I don’t think I ever saw a photograph like that.”

“I’ve got another copy of it in my bedroom,” said Constance. “I’ll give you this one.”

“Oh, Mrs Povey! I couldn’t think—”

“Yes, yes!” said Constance, removing the photograph from the page.

“Oh, *thank* you!” said Lily.

“And that reminds me,” said Constance, getting up with great difficulty from her chair.

“Can I find anything for you?” Lily asked.

“No, no!” said Constance, leaving the room.

She returned in a moment with her jewel-box, a receptacle of ebony with ivory ornamentations.

“I’ve always meant to give you this,” said Constance, taking from the box a fine cameo brooch. “I don’t seem to fancy wearing it myself. And I should like to see you wearing it. It was mother’s. I believe they’re coming into fashion again. I don’t see why you shouldn’t wear it while you’re in mourning. They aren’t half so strict now about mourning as they used to be.”

“Truly!” murmured Lily, ecstatically. They kissed. Constance seemed to breathe out benevolence, as with trembling hands she pinned the brooch at Lily’s neck. She lavished the warm treasure of her heart on Lily, whom she regarded as an almost perfect girl, and who had become the idol of her latter years.

“What a magnificent old watch!” said Lily, as they delved together in the lower recesses of the box. “*And* the chain to it!”

“That was father’s,” said Constance. “He always used to swear by it. When it didn’t agree with the Town Hall, he used to say: ‘Then th’ Town Hall’s wrong.’ And it’s curious, the Town Hall *was* wrong. You know the Town Hall clock has never been a good timekeeper. I’ve been thinking of giving that watch and chain to Dick.”

“*Have* you?” said Lily.

“Yes. It’s just as good as it was when father wore it. My husband never would wear it. He preferred his own. He had little fancies like that. And Cyril takes after his father.” She spoke in her “dry” tone. “I’ve almost decided to give it to Dick—that is, if he behaves himself. Is he still on with his ballooning?”

Lily smiled guiltily: “Oh yes!”

“Well,” said Constance, “I never heard the like! If he’s been up and come down safely, that ought to be enough for him. I wonder you let him do it, my dear.”

“But how can I stop him? I’ve no control over him.”

“But do you mean to say that he’d still do it if you told him seriously you didn’t want him to?”

“Yes,” said Lily; and added: “So I shan’t tell him.”

Constance nodded her head, musing over the secret nature of men. She remembered too well the cruel obstinacy of Samuel, who had nevertheless loved her. And Dick Povey was a thousand times more bizarre than Samuel. She saw him vividly, a little boy, whizzing down King Street on a boneshaker, and his cap flying off. Afterwards it had been motor-cars! Now it was balloons! She sighed. She was struck by the profound

instinctive wisdom just enunciated by the girl.

"Well," she said, "I shall see. I've not made up my mind yet. What's the young man doing this afternoon, by the way?"

"He's gone to Birmingham to try to sell two motor-lorries. He won't be back home till late. He's coming over here tomorrow."

It was an excellent illustration of Dick Povey's methods that at this very moment Lily heard in the Square the sound of a motor-car, which happened to be Dick's car. She sprang up to look.

"Why!" she cried, flushing. "Here he is now!"

"Bless us, bless us!" muttered Constance, closing the box.

When Dick, having left the car in King Street, limped tempestuously into the drawing-room, galvanizing it by his abundant vitality into a new life, he cried joyously: "Sold my lorries! Sold my lorries!" And he explained that by a charming accident he had disposed of them to a chance buyer in Hanbridge, just before starting for Birmingham. So he had telephoned to Birmingham that the matter was "off," and then, being "at a loose end," he had come over to Bursley in search of his betrothed. At Holl's shop they had told him that she was with Mrs Povey. Constance glanced at him, impressed by his jolly air of success. He seemed exactly like his breezy and self-confident advertisements in the *Signal*. He was absolutely pleased with himself. He triumphed over his limp—that ever-present reminder of a tragedy. Who would dream, to look at this blond, laughing, scintillating face, astonishingly young for his years, that he had once passed through such a night as that on which his father had killed his mother while he lay immovable and cursing, with a broken knee, in bed? Constance had heard all about that scene from her husband, and she paused in wonder at the contrasting hazards of existence.

Dick Povey brought his hands together with a resounding smack, and then rubbed them rapidly.

"*And* a good price, too!" he exclaimed blithely. "Mrs Povey, I don't mind telling you that I've netted seventy pounds odd this afternoon."

Lily's eyes expressed her proud joy.

"I hope pride won't have a fall," said Constance, with a calm smile out of which peeped a hint of a rebuke. "That's what I hope. I must just go and see about tea."

"I can't stay for tea—really," said Dick.

"Of course you can," said Constance, positively. "Suppose you'd been at Birmingham? It's weeks since you stayed to tea."

"Oh, well, thanks!" Dick yielded, rather snubbed.

"Can't I save you a journey, Mrs Povey?" Lily asked, eagerly thoughtful.

"No, thank you, my dear. There are one or two little things that need my attention." And Constance departed with her jewel-box.

Dick, having assured himself that the door was closed, assaulted Lily with a kiss.

"Been here long?" he inquired.

"About an hour and a half."

"Glad to see me?"

"Oh, Dick!" she protested.

"Old lady's in one of her humours, eh?"

"No, no! Only she was just talking about balloons—you know. She's very much up in arms."

"You ought to keep her off balloons. Balloons may be the ruin of her wedding-present to us, my child."

"Dick! How can you talk like that? . . . It's all very well saying I ought to keep her off balloons. You try to keep her off balloons when once she begins, and see!"

"What started her?"

"She said she was thinking of giving you old Mr Baines's gold watch and chain—if you behaved yourself."

"Thank you for nothing!" said Dick. "I don't want it."

"Have you seen it?"

"Have I seen it? I should say I had seen it. She's mentioned it once or twice before."

"Oh! I didn't know."

"I don't see myself carting that thing about. I much prefer my own. What do you think of it?"

"Of course it is rather clumsy," said Lily. "But if she offered it to you, you couldn't refuse it, and you'd simply have to wear it."

"Well, then," said Dick, "I must try to behave myself just badly enough to keep off the watch, but not badly enough to upset her notions about wedding-presents."

"Poor old thing!" Lily murmured, compassionately.

Then Lily put her hand silently to her neck.

"What's that?"

"She's just given it to me."

Dick approached very near to examine the cameo brooch. "Hm!" he murmured. It was an adverse verdict. And Lily coincided with it by a lift of the eyebrows.

"And I suppose you'll have to wear that!" said Dick.

“She values it as much as anything she’s got, poor old thing!” said Lily. “It belonged to her mother. And she says cameos are coming into fashion again. It really is rather good, you know.”

“I wonder where she learnt that!” said Dick, dryly. “I see you’ve been suffering from the photographs again.”

“Well,” said Lily, “I much prefer the photographs to helping her to play Patience. The way she cheats herself—it’s too silly! I—”

She stopped. The door, which had after all not been latched, was pushed open, and the antique Fossette introduced herself painfully into the room. Fossette had an affection for Dick Povey.

“Well, Methuselah!” he greeted the animal loudly. She could scarcely wag her tail, or shake the hair out of her dim eyes in order to look up at him. He stooped to pat her.

“That dog does smell,” said Lily, bluntly.

“What do you expects? What she wants is the least dose of prussic acid. She’s a burden to herself.”

“It’s funny that if you venture to hint to Mrs Povey that the dog is offensive she gets quite peppery,” said Lily.

“Well, that’s very simple,” said Dick. “Don’t hint, that’s all! Hold your nose and your tongue too.”

“Dick, I do wish you wouldn’t be so absurd.”

Constance returned into the room, cutting short the conversation.

“Mrs Povey,” said Dick, in a voice full of gratitude, “Lily has just been showing me her brooch.”

He noticed that she paid no heed to him, but passed hurriedly to the window.

“What’s amiss in the Square?” Constance exclaimed. “When I was in the parlour just now I saw a man running along Wedgwood Street, and I said to myself, what’s amiss?”

Dick and Lily joined her at the window.

Several people were hurrying down the Square, and then a man came running with a doctor from the market-place. All these persons disappeared from view under the window of Mrs Povey’s drawing-room, which was over part of Mrs Critchlow’s shop. As the windows of the shop projected beyond the walls of the house it was impossible, from the drawing-room window, to see the pavement in front of the shop.

“It must be something on the pavement—or in the shop!” murmured Constance.

“Oh, ma’am!” said a startled voice behind the three. It was Mary, original of the photograph, who had run unperceived into the drawing-room. “They say as Mrs Critchlow has tried to commit suicide!”

Constance started back. Lily went towards her, with an instinctive gesture of supporting consolation.

“Maria Critchlow tried to commit suicide!” Constance muttered.

“Yes, ma’am! But they say she’s not done it.”

“By Jove! I’d better go and see if I can help, hadn’t I?” cried Dick Povey, hobbling off, excited and speedy. “Strange, isn’t it?” he exclaimed afterwards, “how I manage to come in for things? Sheer chance that I was here today! But it’s always like that! Somehow something extraordinary is always happening where I am.” And this too ministered to his satisfaction, and to his zest for life.

II

When, in the evening, after all sorts of comings and goings, he finally returned to the old lady and the young one, in order to report the upshot, his demeanour was suitably toned to Constance’s mood. The old lady had been very deeply disturbed by the tragedy, which, as she said, had passed under her very feet while she was calmly talking to Lily.

The whole truth came out in a short space of time. Mrs Critchlow was suffering from melancholia. It appeared that for long she had been depressed by the failing trade of the shop, which was none of her fault. The state of the Square had steadily deteriorated. Even the “Vaults” were not what they once were. Four or five shops had been shut up, as it were definitely, the landlords having given up hope of discovering serious tenants. And, of those kept open, the majority were struggling desperately to make ends meet. Only Holl’s and a new upstart draper, who had widely advertised his dressmaking department, were really flourishing. The confectionery half of Mr Brindley’s business was disappearing. People would not go to Hanbridge for their bread or for their groceries, but they would go for their cakes. These electric trams had simply carried to Hanbridge the cream, and much of the milk, of Bursley’s retail trade. Where were unprincipled tradesmen in Hanbridge ready to pay the car-fares of any customer who spent a crown in their establishments. Hanbridge was the geographical centre of the Five Towns, and it was alive to its situation. Useless for Bursley to compete! If Mrs Critchlow had been a philosopher, if she had known that geography had always made history, she would have given up her enterprise a dozen years ago. But Mrs Critchlow was merely Maria Insull. She had seen Baines’s in its magnificent prime, when Baines’s almost conferred a favour on customers in serving them. At the time when she took over the business under the wing of her husband, it was still a good business. But from that instant the tide had seemed to turn. She had fought, and she kept on fighting, stupidly. She was not aware that she was fighting against evolution, not aware that evolution had chosen her for one of its victims! She could understand that all the other shops in the Square should fail, but not that Baines’s should fail! She was as industrious as ever, as good a buyer, as good a seller, as keen for novelties, as economical, as

methodical! And yet the returns dropped and dropped.

She naturally had no sympathy from Charles, who now took small interest even in his own business, or what was left of it, and who was coldly disgusted at the ultimate cost of his marriage. Charles gave her no money that he could avoid giving her. The crisis had been slowly approaching for years. The assistants in the shop had said nothing, or had only whispered among themselves, but now that the crisis had flowered suddenly in an attempted self-murder, they all spoke at once, and the evidences were pieced together into a formidable proof of the strain which Mrs Critchlow had suffered. It appeared that for many months she had been depressed and irritable, that sometimes she would sit down in the midst of work and declare, with every sign of exhaustion, that she could do no more. Then with equal briskness she would arise and force herself to labour. She did not sleep for whole nights. One assistant related how she had complained of having had no sleep whatever for four nights consecutively. She had noises in the ears and a chronic headache. Never very plump, she had grown thinner and thinner. And she was for ever taking pills: this information came from Charles's manager. She had had several outrageous quarrels with the redoubtable Charles, to the stupefaction of all who heard or saw them . . . Mrs Critchlow standing up to her husband! Another strange thing was that she thought the bills of several of the big Manchester firms were unpaid when as a fact they had been paid. Even when shown the receipts she would not be convinced, though she pretended to be convinced. She would recommence the next day. All this was sufficiently disconcerting for female assistants in the drapery. But what could they do?

Then Maria Critchlow had gone a step further. She had summoned the eldest assistant to her corner and had informed her, with all the solemnity of a confession made to assuage a conscience which has been tortured too long, that she had on many occasions been guilty of sexual irregularity with her late employer, Samuel Povey. There was no truth whatever in this accusation (which everybody, however, took care not to mention to Constance); it merely indicated, perhaps, the secret aspirations of Maria Insull, the virgin. The assistant was properly scandalized, more by the crudity of Mrs Critchlow's language than by the alleged sin buried in the past. Goodness knows what the assistant would have done! But two hours later Maria Critchlow tried to commit suicide by stabbing herself with a pair of scissors. There was blood in the shop.

With as little delay as possible she had been driven away to the asylum. Charles Critchlow, enveloped safely in the armour of his senile egotism, had shown no emotion, and very little activity. The shop was closed. And as a general draper's it never opened again. That was the end of Baines's. Two assistants found themselves without a livelihood. The small tumble with the great.

Constance's emotion was more than pardonable; it was justified. She could not eat and Lily could not persuade her to eat. In an unhappy moment Dick Povey mentioned—he never could remember how, afterwards—the word Federation! And then Constance, from a passive figure of grief, became a menace. She overwhelmed Dick Povey with her anathema of Federation, for Dick was a citizen of Hanbridge, where this detestable movement for Federation had had its birth. All the misfortunes of St Luke's Square were due to that great, busy, grasping, unscrupulous neighbour. Had not Hanbridge done enough, without wanting to merge all the Five Towns into one town, of which of course itself would be the centre? For Constance, Hanbridge was a borough of unprincipled adventurers, bent on ruining the ancient "Mother of the Five Towns" for its own glory and aggrandizement. Let Constance hear no more of Federation! Her poor sister Sophia had been dead against Federation, and she had been quite right! All really respectable people were against it! The attempted suicide of Mrs Critchlow sealed the fate of Federation and damped it for ever, in Constance's mind. Her hatred of the idea of it was intensified into violent animosity; insomuch that in the result she died a martyr to the cause of Bursley's municipal independence.

III

It was on a muddy day in October that the first great battle for and against Federation was fought in Bursley. Constance was suffering severely from sciatica. She was also suffering from disgust with the modern world.

Unimaginable things had happened in the Square. For Constance, the reputation of the Square was eternally ruined. Charles Critchlow, by that strange good fortune which always put him in the right when fairly he ought to have been in the wrong, had let the Baines shop and his own shop and house to the Midland Clothiers Company, which was establishing branches throughout Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, and adjacent counties. He had sold his own chemist's stock and gone to live in a little house at the bottom of King Street. It is doubtful whether he would have consented to retire had not Alderman Holl died earlier in the year, thus ending a long rivalry between the old men for the patriarchate of the Square. Charles Critchlow was as free from sentiment as any man, but no man is quite free from it, and the ancient was in a position to indulge sentiment had he chosen. His business was not a source of loss, and he could still trust his skinny hands and peering eyes to make up a prescription. However, the offer of the Midland Clothiers Company tempted him, and as the undisputed "father" of the Square he left the Square in triumph.

The Midland Clothiers Company had no sense of the proprieties of trade. Their sole idea was to sell goods. Having possessed themselves of one of the finest sites in a town which, after all was said and done, comprised

nearly forty thousand inhabitants, they set about to make the best of that site. They threw the two shops into one, and they caused to be constructed a sign compared to which the spacious old "Baines" sign was a postcard. They covered the entire frontage with posters of a theatrical description—coloured posters! They occupied the front page of the *Signal*, and from that pulpit they announced that winter was approaching, and that they meant to sell ten thousand overcoats at their new shop in Bursley at the price of twelve and sixpence each. The tailoring of the world was loudly and coarsely defied to equal the value of those overcoats. On the day of opening they arranged an orchestra or artillery of phonographs upon the leads over the window of that part of the shop which had been Mr Critchlow's. They also carpeted the Square with handbills, and flew flags from their upper storeys. The immense shop proved to be full of overcoats; overcoats were shown in all the three great windows; in one window an overcoat was disposed as a receptacle for water, to prove that the Midland twelve-and-sixpenny overcoats were impermeable by rain. Overcoats flapped in the two doorways. These devices woke and drew the town, and the town found itself received by bustling male assistants very energetic and rapid, instead of by demure anaemic virgins. At moments towards evening the shop was populous with custom; the number of overcoats sold was prodigious. On another day the Midland sold trousers in a like manner, but without the phonographs. Unmistakably the Midland had shaken the Square and demonstrated that commerce was still possible to fearless enterprise.

Nevertheless the Square was not pleased. The Square was conscious of shame, of dignity departed. Constance was divided between pain and scornful wrath. For her, what the Midland had done was to desecrate a shrine. She hated those flags, and those flaring, staring posters on the honest old brick walls, and the enormous gilded sign, and the windows all filled with a monotonous repetition of the same article, and the bustling assistants. As for the phonographs, she regarded them as a grave insult; they had been within twenty feet of her drawing-room window! Twelve-and-sixpenny overcoats! It was monstrous, and equally monstrous was the gullibility of the people. How could an overcoat at twelve and sixpence be "good"? She remembered the overcoats made and sold in the shop in the time of her father and her husband, overcoats of which the inconvenience was that they would not wear out! The Midland, for Constance, was not a trading concern, but something between a cheap-jack and a circus. She could scarcely bear to walk down the Square, to such a degree did the ignoble frontage of the Midland offend her eye and outrage her ancestral pride. She even said that she would give up her house.

But when, on the twenty-ninth of September, she received six months' notice, signed in Critchlow's shaky hand, to quit the house—it was wanted for the Midland's manager, the Midland having taken the premises on condition that they might eject Constance if they chose—the blow was an exceedingly severe one. She had sworn to go—but to be turned out, to be turned out of the house of her birth and out of her father's home, that was different! Her pride, injured as it was, had a great deal of support. It became necessary for her to recollect that she was a Baines. She affected magnificently not to care. But she could not refrain from telling all her acquaintances that she was being turned out of her house, and asking them what they thought of *that*; and when she met Charles Critchlow in the street she seared him with the heat of her resentment. The enterprise of finding a new house and moving into it loomed before her gigantic, terrible; the idea of it was alone sufficient to make her ill.

Meanwhile, in the matter of Federation, preparations for the pitched battle had been going forward, especially in the columns of the *Signal*, where the scribes of each one of the Five Towns had proved that all the other towns were in the clutch of unscrupulous gangs of self-seekers. After months of argument and recrimination, all the towns except Bursley were either favourable or indifferent to the prospect of becoming a part of the twelfth largest town in the United Kingdom. But in Bursley the opposition was strong, and the twelfth largest town in the United Kingdom could not spring into existence without the consent of Bursley. The United Kingdom itself was languidly interested in the possibility of suddenly being endowed with a new town of a quarter of a million inhabitants. The Five Towns were frequently mentioned in the London dailies, and London journalists would write such sentences as: "The Five Towns, which are of course, *as everybody knows*, Hanbridge, Bursley, Knype, Longshaw, and Turnhill . . ." This was renown at last, for the most maligned district in the country! And then a Cabinet Minister had visited the Five Towns, and assisted at an official inquiry, and stated in his hammering style that he meant personally to do everything possible to accomplish the Federation of the Five Towns: an incautious remark, which infuriated, while it flattered, the opponents of Federation in Bursley. Constance, with many other sensitive persons, asked angrily what right a Cabinet Minister had to take sides in a purely local affair. But the partiality of the official world grew flagrant. The Mayor of Bursley openly proclaimed himself a Federationist, though there was a majority on the Council against him. Even ministers of religion permitted themselves to think and to express opinions. Well might the indignant Old Guard imagine that the end of public decency had come! The Federationists were very ingenious individuals. They contrived to enrol in their ranks a vast number of leading men. Then they hired the Covered Market, and put a platform in it, and put all these leading men on the platform, and made them all speak eloquently on the advantages of moving with the times. The meeting was crowded and enthusiastic, and readers of the *Signal* next day could not but see that the battle was won in advance, and that Anti-Federation was dead. In the following week, however, the Anti-Federationists held in the Covered Market an exactly similar meeting (except that the display of leading men was less brilliant), and demanded of a floor of

serried heads whether the old Mother of the Five Towns was prepared to put herself into the hands of a crew of highly paid bureaucrats at Hanbridge, and was answered by a wild defiant “No,” that could be heard on Duck Bank. Readers of the *Signal* next day were fain to see that the battle had not been won in advance. Bursley was lukewarm on the topics of education, slums, water, gas, electricity. But it meant to fight for that mysterious thing, its identity. Was the name of Bursley to be lost to the world? To ask the question was to give the answer.

Then dawned the day of battle, the day of the Poll, when the burgesses were to indicate plainly by means of a cross on a voting paper whether or not they wanted Federation. And on this day Constance was almost incapacitated by sciatica. It was a heroic day. The walls of the town were covered with literature, and the streets dotted with motor-cars and other vehicles at the service of the voters. The greater number of these vehicles bore large cards with the words, “Federation this time.” And hundreds of men walked briskly about with circular cards tied to their lapels, as though Bursley had been a race-course, and these cards too had the words, “Federation this time.” (The reference was to a light poll which had been taken several years before, when no interest had been aroused and the immature project yet defeated by a six to one majority.) All partisans of Federation sported a red ribbon; all Anti-Federationists sported a blue ribbon. The schools were closed and the Federationists displayed their characteristic lack of scruple in appropriating the children. The Federationists, with devilish skill, had hired the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band, an organization of terrific respectability, and had set it to march playing through the town followed by wagonettes crammed with children, who sang:

> Vote, vote, vote for Federation,
> Don’t be stupid, old and slow,
> We are sure that it will be
> Good for the communitie,
> So vote, vote, vote, and make it go.

How this performance could affect the decision of grave burgesses at the polls was not apparent; but the Anti-Federationists feared that it might, and before noon was come they had engaged two bands, and had composed in committee the following lyric in reply to the first one:

> Down, down, down with Federation,
> As we are we’d rather stay;
> When the vote on Saturday’s read
> Federation will be dead,
> Good old Bursley’s sure to win the day.

They had also composed another song, entitled “Dear Old Bursley,” which, however, they made the fatal error of setting to the music of “Auld Lang Syne.” The effect was that of a dirge, and it perhaps influenced many voters in favour of the more cheerful party. The Anti-Federationists, indeed, never regained the mean advantage filched by unscrupulous Federationists with the help of the Silver Prize Band and a few hundred infants. The odds were against the Anti-Federationists. The mayor had actually issued a letter to the inhabitants accusing the Anti-Federationists of unfair methods! This was really too much! The impudence of it knocked the breath out of its victims, and breath is very necessary in a polling contest. The Federationists, as one of their prominent opponents admitted, “had it all their own way,” dominating both the streets and the walls. And when, early in the afternoon, Mr Dick Povey sailed over the town in a balloon that was plainly decorated with the crimson of Federation, it was felt that the cause of Bursley’s separate identity was for ever lost. Still, Bursley, with the willing aid of the public-houses, maintained its gaiety.

IV

Towards dusk a stout old lady, with grey hair, and a dowdy bonnet, and an expensive mantle, passed limping, very slowly, along Wedgwood Street and up the Cock Yard towards the Town Hall. Her wrinkled face had an anxious look, but it was also very determined. The busy, joyous Federationists and Anti-Federationists who knew her not saw merely a stout old lady fussing forth, and those who knew her saw merely Mrs Povey and greeted her perfunctorily, a woman of her age and gait being rather out of place in that feverish altercation of opposed principles. But it was more than a stout old lady, it was more than Mrs Povey, that waddled with such painful deliberation through the streets—it was a miracle.

In the morning Constance had been partially incapacitated by her sciatica; so much so, at any rate, that she had perceived the advisability of remaining on the bedroom floor instead of descending to the parlour. Therefore Mary had lighted the drawing-room fire, and Constance had ensconced herself by it, with Fossette in a basket. Lily Holl had called early, and had been very sympathetic, but rather vague. The truth was that she was concealing the imminent balloon ascent which Dick Povey, with his instinct for the picturesque, had

somehow arranged, in conjunction with a well-known Manchester aeronaut, for the very day of the poll. That was one of various matters that had to be "kept from" the old lady. Lily herself was much perturbed about the balloon ascent. She had to run off and see Dick before he started, at the Football Ground at Bleakridge, and then she had to live through the hours till she should receive a telegram to the effect that Dick had come down safely or that Dick had broken his leg in coming down, or that Dick was dead. It was a trying time for Lily. She had left Constance after a brief visit, with a preoccupied unusual air, saying that as the day was a special day, she should come in again "if she could." And she did not forget to assure Constance that Federation would beyond any question whatever be handsomely beaten at the poll; for this was another matter as to which it was deemed advisable to keep the old lady "in the dark," lest the foolish old lady should worry and commit indiscretions.

After that Constance had been forgotten by the world of Bursley, which could pay small heed to sciatical old ladies confined to sofas and firesides. She was in acute pain, as Mary could see when at intervals she hovered round her. Assuredly it was one of Constance's bad days, one of those days on which she felt that the tide of life had left her stranded in utter neglect. The sound of the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band aroused her from her mournful trance of suffering. Then the high treble of children's voices startled her. She defied her sciatica, and, grimacing, went to the window. And at the first glimpse she could see that the Federation Poll was going to be a much more exciting affair than she had imagined. The great cards swinging from the waggonettes showed her that Federation was at all events still sufficiently alive to make a formidable impression on the eye and the ear. The Square was transformed by this clamour in favour of Federation; people cheered, and sang also, as the procession wound down the Square. And she could distinctly catch the tramping, martial syllables, *"Vote, vote, vote."* She was indignant. The pother, once begun, continued. Vehicles flashed frequently across the Square, most of them in the crimson livery. Little knots and processions of excited wayfarers were a recurring feature of the unaccustomed traffic, and the large majority of them flaunted the colours of Federation. Mary, after some errands of shopping, came upstairs and reported that "it was simply 'Federation' everywhere," and that Mr Brindley, a strong Federationist, was "above a bit above himself"; further, that the interest in the poll was tremendous and universal. She said there were "crowds and crowds" round the Town Hall. Even Mary, generally a little placid and dull, had caught something of the contagious vivacity.

Constance remained at the window till dinner, and after dinner she went to it again. It was fortunate that she did not think of looking up into the sky when Dick's balloon sailed westwards; she would have guessed instantly that Dick was in that balloon, and her grievances would have been multiplied. The vast grievance of the Federation scheme weighed on her to the extremity of her power to bear. She was not a politician; she had no general ideas; she did not see the cosmic movement in large curves. She was incapable of perceiving the absurdity involved in perpetuating municipal divisions which the growth of the district had rendered artificial, vexatious, and harmful. She saw nothing but Bursley, and in Bursley nothing but the Square. She knew nothing except that the people of Bursley, who once shopped in Bursley, now shopped in Hanbridge, and that the Square was a desert infested by cheap-jacks. And there were actually people who wished to bow the neck to Hanbridge, who were ready to sacrifice the very name of Bursley to the greedy humour of that pushing Chicago! She could not understand such people. Did they know that poor Maria Critchlow was in a lunatic asylum because Hanbridge was so grasping? Ah, poor Maria was already forgotten! Did they know that, as a further indirect consequence, she, the daughter of Bursley's chief tradesman, was to be thrown out of the house in which she was born? She wished, bitterly, as she stood there at the window, watching the triumph of Federation, that she had bought the house and shop at the Mericarp sale years ago. She would have shown them, as owner, what was what! She forgot that the property which she already owned in Bursley was a continual annoyance to her, and that she was always resolving to sell it at no matter what loss.

She said to herself that she had a vote, and that if she had been "at all fit to stir out" she would certainly have voted. She said to herself that it had been her duty to vote. And then by an illusion of her wrought nerves, tightened minute by minute throughout the day, she began to fancy that her sciatica was easier. She said: "If only I could go out!" She might have a cab, or any of the parading vehicles would be glad to take her to the Town Hall, and, perhaps, as a favour, to bring her back again. But no. She dared not go out. She was afraid, really afraid that even the mild Mary might stop her. Otherwise, she could have sent Mary for a cab. And supposing that Lily returned, and caught her going out or coming in! She ought not to go out. Yet her sciatica was strangely better. It was folly to think of going out. Yet . . . ! And Lily did not come. She was rather hurt that Lily had not paid her a second visit. Lily was neglecting her . . . She *would* go out. It was not four minutes' walk for her to the Town Hall, and she was better. And there had been no shower for a long time, and the wind was drying the mud in the roadways. Yes, she would go.

Like a thief she passed into her bedroom and put on her things; and like a thief she crept downstairs, and so, without a word to Mary, into the street. It was a desperate adventure. As soon as she was in the street she felt all her weakness, all the fatigue which the effort had already cost her. The pain returned. The streets were still wet and foul, the wind cold, and the sky menacing. She ought to go back. She ought to admit that she had been a fool to dream of the enterprise. The Town Hall seemed to be miles off, at the top of a mountain. She went forward, however, steeled to do her share in the killing of Federation. Every step caused her a gnashing

of her old teeth. She chose the Cock Yard route, because if she had gone up the Square she would have had to pass Holl's shop, and Lily might have spied her.

This was the miracle that breezy politicians witnessed without being aware that it was a miracle. To have impressed them, Constance ought to have fainted before recording her vote, and made herself the centre of a crowd of gapers. But she managed, somehow, to reach home again on her own tortured feet, and an astounded and protesting Mary opened the door to her. Rain was descending. She was frightened, then, by the hardihood of her adventure, and by its atrocious results on her body. An appalling exhaustion rendered her helpless. But the deed was done.

V

The next morning, after a night which she could not have described, Constance found herself lying flat in bed, with all her limbs stretched out straight. She was conscious that her face was covered with perspiration. The bell-rope hung within a foot of her head, but she had decided that, rather than move, in order to pull it, she would prefer to wait for assistance until Mary came of her own accord. Her experiences of the night had given her a dread of the slightest movement; anything was better than movement. She felt vaguely ill, with a kind of subdued pain, and she was very thirsty and somewhat cold. She knew that her left arm and leg were extraordinarily tender to the touch. When Mary at length entered, clean and fresh and pale in all her mildness, she found the mistress the colour of a duck's egg, with puffed features, and a strangely anxious expression.

"Mary," said Constance, "I feel so queer. Perhaps you'd better run up and tell Miss Holl, and ask her to telephone for Dr Stirling."

This was the beginning of Constance's last illness. Mary most impressively informed Miss Holl that her mistress had been out on the previous afternoon in spite of her sciatica, and Lily telephoned the fact to the doctor. Lily then came down to take charge of Constance. But she dared not upbraid the invalid.

"Is the result out?" Constance murmured.

"Oh yes," said Lily, lightly. "There's a majority of over twelve hundred against Federation. Great excitement last night! I told you yesterday morning that Federation was bound to be beaten."

Lily spoke as though the result throughout had been a certainty; her tone to Constance indicated: "Surely you don't imagine that I should have told you untruths yesterday morning merely to cheer you up!" The truth was, however, that towards the end of the day nearly everyone had believed Federation to be carried. The result caused great surprise. Only the profoundest philosophers had not been surprised to see that the mere blind, deaf, inert forces of reaction, with faulty organization, and quite deprived of the aid of logic, had proved far stronger than all the alert enthusiasm arrayed against them. It was a notable lesson to reformers.

"Oh," murmured Constance, startled. She was relieved; but she would have liked the majority to be smaller. Moreover, her interest in the question had lessened. It was her limbs that preoccupied her now.

"You look tired," she said feebly to Lily.

"Do I?" said Lily, shortly, hiding the fact that she had spent half the night in tending Dick Povey, who, in a sensational descent near Macclesfield, had been dragged through the tops of a row of elm trees to the detriment of an elbow-joint; the professional aeronaut had broken a leg.

Then Dr Stirling came.

"I'm afraid my sciatica's worse, Doctor," said Constance, apologetically.

"Did you expect it to be better?" said he, gazing at her sternly. She knew then that someone had saved her the trouble of confessing her escapade.

However, her sciatica was not worse. Her sciatica had not behaved basely. What she was suffering from was the preliminary advances of an attack of acute rheumatism. She had indeed selected the right month and weather for her escapade! Fatigued by pain, by nervous agitation, and by the immense moral and physical effort needed to carry her to the Town Hall and back, she had caught a chill, and had got her feet damp. In such a subject as herself it was enough. The doctor used only the phrase "acute rheumatism." Constance did not know that acute rheumatism was precisely the same thing as that dread disease, rheumatic fever, and she was not informed. She did not surmise for a considerable period that her case was desperately serious. The doctor explained the summoning of two nurses, and the frequency of his own visits, by saying that his chief anxiety was to minimize the fearful pain as much as possible, and that this end could only be secured by incessant watchfulness. The pain was certainly formidable. But then Constance was well habituated to formidable pain. Sciatica, at its most active, cannot be surpassed even by rheumatic fever. Constance had been in nearly continuous pain for years. Her friends, however sympathetic; could not appreciate the intensity of her torture. They were just as used to it as she was. And the monotony and particularity of her complaints (slight though the complaints were in comparison with their cause) necessarily blunted the edge of compassion. "Mrs Povey and her sciatica again! Poor thing, she really is a little tedious!" They were apt not to realize that sciatica is even more tedious than complaints about sciatica.

She asked one day that Dick should come to see her. He came with his arm in a sling, and told her charily that he had hurt his elbow through dropping his stick and slipping downstairs.

“Lily never told me,” said Constance, suspiciously.

“Oh, it’s simply nothing!” said Dick. Not even the sick-room could chasten him of his joy in the magnificent balloon adventure.

“I do hope you won’t go running any risks!” said Constance.

“Never you fear!” said he. “I shall die in my bed.”

And he was absolutely convinced that he would, and not as the result of any accident, either! The nurse would not allow him to remain in the room.

Lily suggested that Constance might like her to write to Cyril. It was only in order to make sure of Cyril’s correct address. He had gone on a tour through Italy with some friends of whom Constance knew nothing. The address appeared to be very uncertain; there were several addresses, *poste restante* in various towns. Cyril had sent postcards to his mother. Dick and Lily went to the post-office and telegraphed to foreign parts.

Though Constance was too ill to know how ill she was, though she had no conception of the domestic confusion caused by her illness, her brain was often remarkably clear, and she could reflect in long sane meditations above the uneasy sea of her pain. In the earlier hours of the night, after the nurses had been changed, and Mary had gone to bed exhausted with stair-climbing, and Lily Holl was recounting the day to Dick up at the grocer’s, and the day-nurse was already asleep, and the night-nurse had arranged the night, then, in the faintly lit silence of the chamber, Constance would argue with herself for an hour at a time. She frequently thought of Sophia. In spite of the fact that Sophia was dead she still pitied Sophia as a woman whose life had been wasted. This idea of Sophia’s wasted and sterile life, and of the far-reaching importance of adhering to principles, recurred to her again and again. “Why did she run away with him? If only she had not run away!” she would repeat. And yet there had been something so fine about Sophia! Which made Sophia’s case all the more pitiable! Constance never pitied herself. She did not consider that Fate had treated her very badly. She was not very discontented with herself. The invincible common sense of a sound nature prevented her, in her best moments, from feebly dissolving in self-pity. She had lived in honesty and kindliness for a fair number of years, and she had tasted triumphant hours. She was justly respected, she had a position, she had dignity, she was well-off. She possessed, after all, a certain amount of quiet self-conceit. There existed nobody to whom she would “knuckle down” or could be asked to “knuckle down.” True, she was old! So were thousands of other people in Bursley. She was in pain. So there were thousands of other people. With whom would she be willing to exchange lots? She had many dissatisfactions. But she rose superior to them. When she surveyed her life, and life in general, she would think, with a sort of tart but not sour cheerfulness: *“Well, that is what life is!”* Despite her habit of complaining about domestic trifles, she was, in the essence of her character, “a great body for making the best of things.” Thus she did not unduly bewail her excursion to the Town Hall to vote, which the sequel had proved to be ludicrously supererogatory. “How was I to know?” she said.

The one matter in which she had gravely to reproach herself was her indulgent spoiling of Cyril after the death of Samuel Povey. But the end of her reproaches always was: “I expect I should do the same again! And probably it wouldn’t have made any difference if I hadn’t spoiled him!” And she had paid tenfold for the weakness. She loved Cyril, but she had no illusions about him; she saw both sides of him. She remembered all the sadness and all the humiliations which he had caused her. Still, her affection was unimpaired. A son might be worse than Cyril was; he had admirable qualities. She did not resent his being away from England while she lay ill. “If it was serious,” she said, “he would not lose a moment.” And Lily and Dick were a treasure to her. In those two she really had been lucky. She took great pleasure in contemplating the splendour of the gift with which she would mark her appreciation of them at their approaching wedding. The secret attitude of both of them towards her was one of good-natured condescension, expressed in the tone in which they would say to each other, “the old lady.” Perhaps they would have been startled to know that Constance lovingly looked down on both of them. She had unbounded admiration for their hearts; but she thought that Dick was a little too brusque, a little too clownish, to be quite a gentleman. And though Lily was perfectly ladylike, in Constance’s opinion she lacked backbone, or grit, or independence of spirit. Further, Constance considered that the disparity of age between them was excessive. It is to be doubted whether, when all was said, Constance had such a very great deal to learn from the self-confident wisdom of these young things.

After a period of self-communion, she would sometimes fall into a shallow delirium. In all her delirium she was invariably wandering to and fro, lost, in the long underground passage leading from the scullery past the coal-cellar and the cinder-cellar to the backyard. And she was afraid of the vast-obscure of those regions, as she had been in her infancy.

It was not acute rheumatism but a supervening pericarditis that in a few days killed her. She died in the night, alone with the night-nurse. By a curious chance the Wesleyan minister, hearing that she was seriously ill, had called on the previous day. She had not asked for him; and this pastoral visit, from a man who had always said that the heavy duties of the circuit rendered pastoral visits almost impossible, made her think. In the evening she had requested that Fossette should be brought upstairs.

Thus she was turned out of her house, but not by the Midland Clothiers Company. Old people said to one another: “Have you heard that Mrs Povey is dead? Eh, dear me! There’ll be no one left soon.” These old people were bad prophets. Her friends genuinely regretted her, and forgot the tediousness of her sciatica.

They tried, in their sympathetic grief, to picture to themselves all that she had been through in her life. Possibly they imagined that they succeeded in this imaginative attempt. But they did not succeed. No one but Constance could realize all that Constance had been through, and all that life had meant to her.

Cyril was not at the funeral. He arrived three days later. (As he had no interest in the love affairs of Dick and Lily, the couple were robbed of their wedding-present The will, fifteen years old, was in Cyril's favour.) But the immortal Charles Critchlow came to the funeral, full of calm, sardonic glee, and without being asked. Though fabulously senile, he had preserved and even improved his faculty for enjoying a catastrophe. He now went to funerals with gusto, contentedly absorbed in the task of burying his friends one by one. It was he who said, in his high, trembling, rasping, deliberate voice: "It's a pity her didn't live long enough to hear as Federation is going on after all! That would ha' worritted her." (For the unscrupulous advocates of Federation had discovered a method of setting at naught the decisive result of the referendum, and that day's *Signal* was fuller than ever of Federation.)

When the short funeral procession started, Mary and the infirm Fossette (sole relic of the connexion between the Baines family and Paris) were left alone in the house. The tearful servant prepared the dog's dinner and laid it before her in the customary soup-plate in the customary corner. Fossette sniffed at it, and then walked away and lay down with a dog's sigh in front of the kitchen fire. She had been deranged in her habits that day; she was conscious of neglect, due to events which passed her comprehension. And she did not like it. She was hurt, and her appetite was hurt. However, after a few minutes, she began to reconsider the matter. She glanced at the soup-plate, and, on the chance that it might after all contain something worth inspection, she awkwardly balanced herself on her old legs and went to it again.

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Cuento de viejas

RBA

NARRATIVAS

Arnold Bennett

Cuento de viejas

Arnold Bennett

Cuento de viejas

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INTRODUCCIÓN

RETRATO DE INTERIORES CON MUJER MADURA

¿Seríamos capaces de imaginarnos viejas a las mujeres de Vermeer? La popularización de la cultura, antaño leída y entendida con mayúsculas, ha introducido en nuestros salones y gabinetes la foto fija y cinematográfica de una "joven de la perla" cotidiana, eternamente joven y bella en su interior amarillo, una joven que se encarna en múltiples dobles y avatares de una escena siempre doméstica y velada, que se transmuta en espera esperanzada en su armónico; otra joven que eternamente ya —parece— lee una carta, mientras deja que la luz tamizada y siempre triste de esa Holanda que en el siglo XVII descubrió el *yo* junto con el protestantismo, defina sus perfiles y conforme la ambigüedad de un interior, que, para siempre ya, nos empeñaremos en leer como enigmático. Esa luz incomprensible que permite que un «interior» de objetos, donde proliferan mapas y pesas y balanzas que nos hablan de un mundo exterior de viajes y comercio del naciente mundo moderno capitalista, se encarne en una joven viva y en su mundo se ha transformado en postal y en memoria casi atemporal. La imagen excesivamente mediatizada —y me refiero aquí a los medios de comunicación de masas, que han transformado la obra artística y literaria en objeto de consumo cultural[2] — nos hace olvidar la Historia, esto es, el tiempo, la circunstancia vital y concreta que promovió la carta o el pesaje del oro. La eficacia del proceso es tal, que cuando en el siglo XXI novelistas, traductores y directores cinematográficos reelaboran en discurso la imagen de Vermeer, se ven abocados a transformar a la mujer con un pendiente en la oreja, que es el título que dio el pintor a su obra, en el mucho más cinematográfico y publicitario de «La joven de la perla». Ya ha dejado de ser una mujer más entre tantas de su época y circunstancia: ha pasado a la determinación de «la joven», mientras que el pendiente que en su tiempo y circunstancia era mercancía costosa que exigía lejanos viajes hasta Indias Orientales reales y de la imaginación se ha transformado hoy en un regalo festivo que puede adquirirse en unos grandes almacenes. Y en esta transformación se deja leer nuestra temporalidad que exige sus valores propios, como son la juventud siempre detenida y el elaborado discurso entre exótico, erótico y feminista de papel couché que venimos asociando con las perlas.

Nos resulta difícil imaginar la madurez, que no ya la vejez, de las jóvenes de Vermeer, "mujeres" en los títulos escuetos que el pintor decidió para sus obras. Mujeres entradas en la vida, por lo tanto, ya que juventud y madurez se definían en otros términos en el lejano XVII, donde la mujer era ya madura cumplida la veintena, como son viejas, o al menos calificadas como tales, las heroínas de la novela de Bennett, a pesar de que el grueso de su historia corresponda a su época de mayor esplendor. Y, sin embargo, tanto Vermeer como Bennett deciden convertir a sus mujeres, que no jóvenes, en protagonistas o heroínas de una historia que merece contarse con colores. Y si me permito el anacronismo de establecer un diálogo entre Vermeer y Arnold Bennett, que encabalgó su vida entre los siglos XIX y XX, es porque Bennett, en la novela que nos ocupa, es también un escritor de interiores, y un escritor de interiores protestantes, donde se ilumina un retrato de mujer que también lee sus cartas y cuenta detenidamente sus monedas y los lienzos y paños de una muy burguesa casa de comercio de telas. Sin embargo, al contrario que en la foto fija que constituye el cuadro de Vermeer, detenido en la luz de un momento preciso y estático, el retrato de Arnold Bennett se modula precisamente en el tiempo, esto es, en la Historia, que siempre se quiere con una geografía concreta y unos usos y comercios tanto humanos como materiales u objetuales precisos y con fecha. Porque las jóvenes de Vermeer tuvieron necesariamente que envejecer, aunque nosotros los humanos nos resistamos empecinadamente al ejercicio de imaginación de unos cuerpos cansados que pocas veces ya deberán enfrentarse a esas decisiones que constituyen los momentos nucleares de la mejor narrativa: cuando ya ni siquiera se espera la carta que pueda cambiar siquiera una circunstancia de la vida. Quiero decir con ello, que la popularización de la narrativa contemporánea parece haber establecido unos cánones estéticos que «fijan» una determinada tipificación estética de la heroína narrativa, y que funcionan hasta tal punto en nuestro imaginario colectivo que nos resulta incluso imposible imaginar que las hoy denominadas jóvenes de Vermeer no fueran consideradas tales en su momento y circunstancia. Más aún: que puedan envejecer sin perder el esplendor estético del interior que las habita. Y el paralelismo apunta también en otra dirección: la atemporalidad y el estatismo del pintor flamenco nos obligan a leer la historia del protestantismo holandés y del incipiente materialismo burgués en los mapas, pesas, sedas, oros, etc. plasmados y detenidos en el lienzo. Los viajes, el comercio, el trabajo están absolutamente presentes, circundando a esas mujeres, incluso vertebrando su carácter y personalidad. El estatismo del cuadro se convierte necesariamente en temporalidad,

y por lo tanto en Historia, en la obra de Arnold Bennett, sin que el *horror vacui* de una cierta forma de vida, caracterizada por la proliferación material, abandone el lienzo, en este caso narrativo.

Y es que quizá sea el transcurrir del tiempo en un retrato el tema central de este *Cuento de Viejas* (1908), donde Bennett, escritor «tradicional» y enormemente popular en la Inglaterra de principios del siglo XX, introduce su cuña personal respecto a lo que viene siendo la tradición narrativa —y no sólo británica— desde Jane Austen hasta su contemporáneo Henry James en el clásico *Retrato de una Dama* (1881). Jane Austen fijó ya en el siglo XVIII los parámetros de la elección amorosa como argumento maestro de toda la existencia femenina, cuya coda necesaria es siempre el matrimonio entendido como «romance patrimonial», que no matrimonial, en sus distintas variantes[3]. Porque en la tradición narrativa inglesa el «romance» viene tipificado como una variante no realista de la novela que se centra fundamentalmente en el asunto amoroso. Pero cuando Jane Austen retoma la tradición en *Orgullo y Prejuicio* o en *Emma,* tuvo buen cuidado de enhebrar el tema de la elección amorosa en el realismo de la mejor narrativa de costumbres que elabora el discurso necesario de la burguesía. La clave no es ya la elección amorosa, sino el matrimonio. Los elementos románticos de todo «romance» se articulan a partir de ahora en el matrimonio como contrato patrimonial que vertebra la organización social en torno a los valores familiares. El *romance* ya no es tanto pasión, aventura, riesgo, sino seguridad, estabilidad y la instauración de un marco contractual desde el que trasmitir sin riesgo posible el patrimonio, cualquiera que éste sea, fundamentalmente material, pero también artístico o intelectual. A partir de ahí, la novela sentimental y popular, dirigida a un público lector esencialmente femenino, vino a confirmar ese modelo básico, que exigía el silencio y la desaparición narrativa de la mujer/ joven tras los fastos de la boda, convertida en lo que los Victorianos denominaron «el ángel de la casa», invisible y sin discurso. La luz se extinguía definitivamente en ese retrato de interiores donde la existencia había dejado de mudar y de producir acontecimientos relevantes para la mujer casada. Y cuando los grandes maestros del XIX, que es lo mismo que decir los grandes maestros de la novela, Flaubert, Tolstói, Clarín, retoman en distinta clave el tema de la elección amorosa entendida como «romance patrimonial», que es el gran tema de la novela burguesa, condenan a sus mujeres, maduras y responsables, o bien a la muerte, como en el caso de Anna Karenina o Emma Bovary, o bien a la postración más absoluta, como en el caso de Ana Ozores, tendida como un sapo a los pies del Magistral de la catedral de Vetusta. La tradición narrativa —que no necesariamente la dramática— occidental tematiza sus retratos de mujeres en juventud e inocencia, desde Isolda y Eloísa, hasta Sade, porque el tema de la elección amorosa es el gran argumento de la sociedad burguesa europea hasta la llegada de las vanguardias. La madurez de la mujer tras el matrimonio no es sino silencio y generalización, a no ser que el adulterio venga a romper el relato magistral construido a lo largo de los siglos por la tradición literaria, y más singularmente por la narrativa occidental. En este sentido, el comienzo de *Anna Karenina* no puede ser más espectacular: «Todas las familias felices se parecen unas a otras, cada familia desdichada lo es a su manera».

De ahí el riesgo y el interés del *Cuento de Viejas* que Arnold Bennett nos propone en esta obra, considerada unánimemente por la crítica como la mejor de sus novelas. Porque contra el viento y marea de una cierta tradición, se arriesga a detener el filtro de su mirada narrativa en la madurez —diríamos hoy— de dos mujeres en plena era Victoriana. Dos mujeres comunes, que llevan una existencia paralela y similar a la de otras muchas de sus contemporáneas encerradas en otros tantos interiores de la Inglaterra de provincias que se industrializa y se moderniza al compás de sus victorias y progresos coloniales, bajo el imperio de una reina, Victoria, que parece inmortal e inmutable. Dos existencias en principio antinarrativas, si hemos de concebir lo novelesco como aventura extraordinaria; dos existencias, sin embargo, con sus correspondientes dosis de incertidumbre, perplejidad, indecisión, felicidad, dolor y muerte. Porque la dolorosa perplejidad con la que un día nos levantamos y descubrimos que ya no somos jóvenes y que la vida no era sino esa nuestra particular y muy personal sucesión de decisiones y rutinas, no deja de sucederse en su precariedad y contingencia, al compás de los grandes acontecimientos que marcan .la Historia con mayúsculas; porque mientras las “viejas” de nuestro cuento venden paños y telas o regentan pensiones parisinas, la Inglaterra de las Midlands, auténtica protagonista de la novela, ha dejado de ser esa comunidad orgánica rural vertebrada en torno a los valores del protestantismo de corte popular, que tan bien caracterizara Leavis en *La Gran Tradición*[4], para verse surcada por el ferrocarril y abiertas sus verdes laderas en las minas de carbón y el idilio de su pastoral poética ensuciado por el humo de las fábricas de acero y de textil, mientras la seguridad victoriana se resquebraja con Darwin, Spenser y el pesimismo de Thomas Hardy. Mientras, al otro lado del Canal, la Comuna y el sitio de París anuncian el mundo moderno y amenazan el futuro de esa insularización tan querida de los británicos.

Me gustaría proponer al lector un juego o un viaje con su imaginación. Tomemos dos cuadros hoy clásicos de Vermeer, la joven en azul que lee una carta y la joven que pesa el oro en la balanza. Imaginémoslas, en el mismo interior, veinte años más tarde. Podrían muy bien ser las “viejas” de nuestra historia. Constanza, que sigue encerrada contando los metros y yardas de los paños y terciopelos y las libras y chelines de la caja registradora de su comercio de tejidos, en la plaza de lo que fue un pueblo y ya es una ciudad devorada por la industria de la famosa cerámica iniciada por Josiah Weddgewood, y Sofía, leyendo eternamente la carta en la que espera que su amante la rescate de esa existencia anodina y le lleve al París de

la aventura, que, en su caso, se revela tan mediocre como la existencia gris y siempre predecible de su hermana. La tematización del color y la luz en oscuridad y la repetición *ad libitum* de la escena, en Negro y con arrugas, sería el argumento central de nuestro cuento. Porque como dice Constanza, al final de su vida y de la obra,

> Constanza nunca se compadecía de sí misma. No consideraba que los Hados la hubieran tratado muy mal. No estaba muy descontenta de sí misma... ¡Cierto, era vieja! Como miles de personas en Bursley. Sufría. Como miles de personas. ¿Con quién estaña dispuesta a intercambiar su destino? Tenía muchas insatisfacciones. Pero se elevaba por encima de ellas. Cuando repasaba su vida, y la vida en general, pensaba, con una especie de ánimo ácido pero no agrio: *«¡Bueno, así es la vida!»*.

UNA MUY PARTICULAR Y BENNETTIANA GEOGRAFÍA MORAL

Esta aceptación del aburrimiento y la respetabilidad como destino, de una cierta forma de madurez desencantada, está íntimamente ligada a otro de los temas centrales de la novela como es el discurrir de la sociedad de provincias británica, vertebrada por los valores de un protestantismo que informa todos los aspectos de la vida y que nos resulta un tanto ajeno en nuestras sociedades mediterráneas. El trabajo, la austeridad, la *earnestness* o seriedad y empeño[5], el dinero, una cierta forma de moralidad pública, que no privada, conforman un sentido de pequeña comunidad y una sociedad civil, decididamente burguesa y vertebradora de la Inglaterra rural y provinciana, en la que curiosamente la iglesia oficial y sus representantes brillan por su ausencia. Quiero decir con ello que los valores metodistas informan completamente el universo de las hermanas Baines, el de la comunidad de Bursley donde viven, así como el de la región de Staffordshire y su industria manufacturera que está cambiando radicalmente el mapa real, sentimental e intelectual de la Inglaterra provinciana y su clase media. Pero, al mismo tiempo, y haciendo un ejercicio superficial de literatura comparada, resulta visiblemente llamativo el que en una novela de un cierto corte costumbrista, con protagonistas femeninas, en la que una de las peripecias fundamentales sea la fuga de una joven con su amante, los representantes de la Iglesia brillen por su ausencia, en una familia y en una pequeña población configuradas según unos valores que hunden sus raíces en una visión religiosa como es el Metodismo[6]. Es como imaginar *La Regenta* sin el Magistral. En cualquier caso, una muy diferente relación de fuerzas entre lo público y lo privado de la que nos tienen acostumbrados nuestros novelistas españoles clásicos.

Cuento de Viejas configura, por medio de la focalización narrativa en interiores oscuros, atiborrados de objetos materiales que adquieren una solidez narrativa que compite con el protagonismo de los personajes y los caracterizan, una definición de esa clase media que hizo posible la industrialización y modernización de Inglaterra en una geografía especial y social, pormenorizada en sus señas de identidad. Cumple así con una antigua tradición literaria inglesa que, en constante dialéctica con la novela de corte más continental e intelectual, ya sea la picaresca de su momento estelar en el XVIII, de corte cervantino, cuyo máximo representante sería Fielding, ya sea en los albores del XX, con la experimentación modernista de Woolf o Forster, o Huxley, se esfuerza por definir un realismo provinciano que se pretende específicamente británico, y que, repito, se presenta dialécticamente frente al esteticismo aristocrático. Una tradición en la que encontramos no sólo a Bennett, sino a George Eliot, a Cooper y su *Scenes from Provincial Life [*"*Escenas de la vida de provincias*"] y hasta D. H. Lawrence y su conformación de un Nottinghamshire definido por la actividad minera y los valores de su clase. No es tanto el mundo rural frente al urbano, sino la pequeña comunidad y su ladrillo rojo frente al cosmopolitismo urbano del gran Londres y las grandes familias en Blenheim, por ejemplo, con sus raíces oxonianas o cantabrigenses; la respetabilidad frente a la aventura y la experimentación. El acierto de Bennett, reconocido unánimemente por la critica, fue el de precisar y delinear no sólo socialmente sino también históricamente un territorio de ficción, Staffordhire, y su industria manufacturera, su Yoknapataupha personal, centrado en lo que él bautiza como las «Cinco Ciudades», que no son otras que las famosas e históricas «Six Towns» que conforman la cuenca del Trent, y donde se desarrolla una aventura específica que, junto a otras similares, vertebró la Inglaterra moderna e industrializada. Y así, el arco temporal que enmarca la novela (1860-1907) desvela el proceso de la industrialización de un espacio rural, merced a las minas de carbón de fácil acceso, que indujeron a Josiah Wedgewood a establecer allí su industria de loza y cerámica que transformó definitivamente el paisaje en lo que hoy en día es la conurbación de Stoke-on Trent, que agrupa a lo que fueron los seis pueblos, luego ciudades, de Turnstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Longton y Fenton, que el escritor transformó ficcionalmente y por motivos eufónicos en las «Cinco Ciudades» de Turnhill, Bursley —donde tiene lugar nuestra novela—, Hanbridge, Knype y Longshaw,

olvidando a Fenton. Esta unidad alfarera que en principio surge a partir de una misma industria alfarera y manufacturera instalada en cinco ciudades discretas y que, al compás de la revolución industrial y los cambios sociales que ésta propicia, se transforman en un paisaje único y característico.

> Son únicas e indispensables. Desde el norte del condado hasta el sur, sólo ellas representan la civilización, la ciencia aplicada, la manufactura organizada y el siglo [...] Son únicas e indispensables porque no podemos tomar el té en una taza de té sin la ayuda de las Cinco Ciudades, porque no podemos comer decentemente sin la ayuda de las Cinco Ciudades. Por eso la arquitectura de las Cinco Ciudades es una arquitectura de hornos y chimeneas; por eso su atmósfera es tan negra como su barro; por eso arde y humea toda la noche, de tal modo que se ha comparado a Longshaw con el infierno; por eso es desconocedora de los entresijos de la agricultura y no ha visto el trigo excepto en forma de paja de embalar y hogazas de kilo y medio; por eso, en otro orden de cosas, comprende los misteriosos hábitos del fuego y la tierra pura; por eso vive apiñado en calles resbaladizas donde el ama de casa tiene que cambiar los visillos de las ventanas al menos cada quince días si quiere seguir siendo respetable; por eso se levanta en masa a la seis de la mañana en verano y en invierno y se va a dormir cuando cierran las tabernas; por eso existe: para que uno pueda tomar té en una taza de té y juguetear con una chuleta en un plato. Toda la loza cotidiana que se utiliza en el reino se hace en las Cinco Ciudades, y mucha más[7].

Este es el territorio que entró definitivamente en la historia y en la historia literaria de la mano de Arnold Bennett, que le dio encarnadura vital en sus mejores novelas, ficcionalizando así la geografía de su infancia. Porque Bennett nació en Hanley el 27 de mayo de 1867, en el seno de una familia de clase media semejante a las que conforman sus novelas de Staffordshire. Su padre era un *self-made-man,* que inició su andadura laboral como obrero en la industria local, tras lo cual y muy en la línea de los valores de su clase se procuró una educación autodidacta que le llevó a establecerse como abogado, mientras simultáneamente regentaba un comercio de telas y una pequeña casa de empeños, en definitiva, un universo local muy semejante al conformado por la familia Baines de *Cuento de Viejas.* Como era preceptivo en su clase y condición en plena era Victoriana, creó una familia numerosa. Arnold es el mayor de nueve hijos, de los que sobrevivieron seis para conformar la unidad familiar. Era un joven extremadamente tímido, con una penosa tartamudez que arrastraría el resto de su vida, y cuyo único talento, muy poco valorado en la estructura laboral y social de las «Potteries»[8] de su época, era un talento verbal que le llevó a ganar dos concursos literarios locales, uno de prosa y otro de poesía en sus tiempos de estudiante de secundaria. Pero la conciencia literaria no entraba en los planes de un hombre emprendedor y de empresa como su padre, lo cual le llevó a afirmar: «No sé qué voy a hacer con el pobre Arnold. Nunca será capaz de ganarse la vida». Su padre planificó para él una carrera de abogado, pero Arnold nunca llegó a superar los exámenes de la Universidad de Londres que le hubieran podido habilitar para el ejercicio del derecho.

Londres, sin embargo, fue una revelación. Nunca sabremos si su fracaso académico fue una reformulación del «preferiría no hacerlo» de Bartleby, pero Bennett aprovechó la circunstancia para emplearse como escribiente y pasante en un despacho de abogados mientras ve cómo realmente va naciendo en él la pasión y el oficio de escribir. Lee y descubre vorazmente la literatura, y comienza a enviar artículos y relatos seriados bajo seudónimos tales como «Barbara» y «Sarah Voladle» a distintos periódicos y revistas. Muy pronto le ofrecen el puesto de subdirector de una importante revista femenina, *Woman,* que quizá inaugura ese su peculiar interés narrativo por el retrato de mujer, en una época como el último tercio de la era Victoriana en la que «The Woman Question» [“La Cuestión de la Mujer”] constituía un tema candente. Muy pronto ascendió a director de la misma e inició su ingente carrera periodística, que se puede resumir en más de tres mil artículos sobre gran variedad de temas de actualidad, además de literarios. Su modelo parece ser el escritor enciclopédico, y su proverbial capacidad de trabajo y amplitud de intereses le convierten en firma habitual de revistas y periódicos tan distintos e importantes como *The Realist, New Age, Saturday Evening Post* y el modélico *Evening Standard,* en el que colaboraría hasta el fin de sus días.

Pero el periodismo es tan sólo uno de los cauces en los que vierte su talento literario. Su descubrimiento de la literatura viene de la mano de sus lecturas realistas inglesas, como el George Moore de *The Mummer’s Wife,* que es quien le lleva hasta el naturalismo y realismo francés: Zola, Maupassant y más tarde los hermanos Goncourt. En su diario leemos: «por lo que respecta a la novela, creo que hasta los últimos años no hemos logrado entender y absorber esa pasión por la presentación artística y formal de la verdad que tienen los novelistas franceses, ese sentido de las palabras como palabras, que animaba la obra de Flaubert, de los Goncourt y Maupassant. Ninguno de los maestros de la novela inglesa del XIX (creo yo) demuestra interés profundo alguno por la forma y el tratamiento narrativo: están completamente absortos en su tema»[9]. Más abajo me referiré con más detalle al peculiar realismo bennettiano, baste constar aquí su filiación literaria que

origina lo mejor de su producción, porque si George Moore le llevó hasta el realismo formal continental, también le descubrió su tema y su geografía sentimental: la tierra de su infancia, las «Potteries», sus cinco ciudades alfareras, como escenografía vital y novelística. Así, ya en 1895 publica en el esteticista *The Yellow Book,* un relato muy intenso y triste, «A Letter Home» ["Carta a casa"], en el que ya "la casa" es Bursley en Staffordshire y que anuncia desarrollos posteriores. Con todo, y casi predeciblemente, su primera novela, al estilo de Gissing en *Grub Street,* es *A Man from the North* (1898) ["*Un hombre del Norte"],* que narra la penosa vida de un futuro sedicente escritor que malvive en los márgenes de los círculos literarios londinenses, sin conseguir nunca romper ese trazo mágico que le separa de la auténtica creación, para acabar en un matrimonio estéril en una vida adosada de suburbio londinense. La novela es todavía torpe, pero ya apunta esa dicotomía Norte/Sur de la que he hablado más arriba, y el tema del Norte provinciano que más tarde y ya en los años cincuenta constituirá la seña de identidad de una generación de escritores, los *jóvenes airados*[10]*,* que bajaron a Londres a estrenar obras como *Mirando hacia atrás con ira* de John Osborne, a publicar soledades provincianas como *La Soledad del corredor de fondo* de Allan Sillitoe, la picaresca de *Lucky Jim,* o todo el movimiento del «Free Cinema». En este sentido, es curioso destacar, dentro de los movimientos pendulares de las historias literarias, cómo tras un cierto olvido de la obra de Arnold Bennett en los años veinte y treinta, la postguerra y el retorno a un cierto realismo en abierta oposición al experimentalismo modernista vino a redescubrir su obra y la de sus contemporáneos edwardianos, instalados ya definitivamente en la historia canónica de la narrativa inglesa. El clima social e intelectual que propició la creación de las universidades de «ladrillo rojo», como se llamó a las del norte de Inglaterra, y la generación de *jóvenes airados* contribuyó a rescatar del olvido la obra de Bennett y supuso, sin duda, la revalorización de nuestro autor, considerado, a partir de los años cincuenta, como un clásico. Prueba de ello es que escritores de la citada generación son precisamente los que elaboran su retorno crítico, como John Wain en la edición de la obra dentro de la colección de clásicos ingleses de Penguin, y la novelista Margaret Drabble, que escribe la mejor biografía crítica de Bennett[11].

El descubrimiento de su territorio mental y moral le lleva a publicar una gran novela, *Anna of the Five Towns* ["*Ana de las Cinco Ciudades"],* en 1902. Entre una y otra está el descubrimiento de Chejov y, con él, la constatación de esa contingencia humana que no consigue esquivar el peso de las circunstancias También, el descubrimiento de la mujer *y su* experiencia anodina como el gran tema de su novela realista. Nos atreveríamos a aventurar que esta es la gran aportación benettiana. Frente al «gran relato» de la novela burguesa del XIX, *Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary* o la Dorothea Casaubon de *Middlemarch,* espléndidas y contundentes todas ellas en el fracaso de su existencia debido a un error de juicio cometido en su juventud, Bennett propone el «relato menor» de una existencia femenina acomodaticia y gris, donde no hay gran relato, ni tampoco gran elección determinante de una vida, que siempre seguirá su curso monótono dependiente no de las grandes elecciones, sino del peso de las circunstancias. Bennett encuentra así su gran tema en el silencio, por así decir, de la mujer. De ahí que nos atrevamos a afirmar que Bennett inicia en *Anna* el primero de una serie de «retratos narrativos» en la línea del Henry James de *Retrato de una dama:* la blanca palidez de la existencia de Anna condicionada por la estética mediada del humo y la ética del trabajo y por la mediocridad de su tierra. La obra le procuró un gran éxito de crítica y le animó a comenzar su gran crónica de la vida y la Historia de las «Potteries», que tras el éxito de *Cuento de Viejas* se materializaría en lo que conocemos como la *Trilogía de Clayhanger,* la primera novela de la serie, publicada en 1910, seguida por *Hilda Lessways* (1911) y *These Twains* (1915). Será esta trilogía, junto con *Anna* y *Cuento de Viejas,* las que aseguren su lugar en la historia de la literatura inglesa como clásicos del período edwardiano[12].

Pero el talento de Bennett es polifacético, y su descubrimiento de la literatura *seria,* por así decir, no le impide dedicarse con empeño a la elaboración de toda una serie de novelas sentimentales y sensacionalistas, *"pot-boilers",* para ganar dinero rápidamente. Así, *The Grand Babylon Hotel ["Gran Hotel Babilonia"],* publicada simultáneamente a *Anna,* con la que consiguió un gran éxito popular, iniciando una constante que no abandonaría nunca. En sus diarios podemos constatar que abordaba su elaboración literaria con el mismo empeño productivo que sus colegas manufactureros, distinguiendo muy bien sus tres facetas y los distintos géneros en los que se movía, *aunque* sin abdicar nunca de una pretendida excelencia. «Al final de 1900», leemos en la introducción a su correspondencia editada por James Hepbum, «Bennett producía tantas obras y de tan variada índole que apenas parece creíble. Era director de una revista, y soporte y principal consejero de otras dos. Reseñaba libros al compás de uno por día, y a la vez escribía crítica literaria de primera calidad. Contabilizó ciento noventa y seis artículos en un año. Y además, y en el mismo período de tiempo, escribió seis relatos, una obra de teatro en un acto, dos obras de teatro completas (en colaboración con Edén Phillipots y Arthur Hooley), una novela sensacionalista, *The Grand Babylon Hotel,* que muy pronto tendrá también un éxito sensacional de público, además de la primera versión de *Anna,* que iba a complacer a los críticos tanto como el *Hotel* había complacido al público. Y por si esto fuera poco, había leído y aconsejado a C. Arthur Peterson sobre la posible edición y publicación de cincuenta manuscritos»[13]. Es interesante destacar, pienso, esta faceta múltiple, cualitativa y cuantitativamente hablando, de Arnold Bennett, porque es enormemente ilustrativa del concepto y valoración tanto del creador como de la obra literaria, en los estertores de la era victoriana y en los comienzos del siglo XX, antes de que una cierta vanguardia modernista convirtiera a la

obra literaria en un artefacto único, irrepetible, autónomo y opaco, elaborando el concepto de la «dificultad poética», que transforma el poema o la novela en un fetiche, encerrando al escritor en su torre de marfil.

El descubrimiento de la provincia y lo particular como gran tema literario viene paradójicamente de la mano de la cosmopolitización de Bennett. En 1903, y como todo escritor moderno británico que se preciara, viaja a París. Su estancia y experiencia parisina, que prolongó durante cinco años, constituyó una suerte de educación universitaria. Muy pronto entabla relación con la vida literaria y cultural que cambia definitivamente su mapa literario. Conoce a Marcel Schwob, traductor al francés del *Hamlet* de Sarah Bernhardt, que había puesto en pie a todo París. Entabla amistad con Maurice Ravel, con Turguenev, y fundamentalmente con Gide, con quien mantiene una larga correspondencia hasta el final de sus días, que, recientemente, ha provocado alguna disquisición acerca de su condición sexual[14]. Se empapa de la nueva escritura francesa, sin olvidar lo que su tierra y sociedad natal le habían dado, sagacidad, una cierta contundencia y terquedad, una mirada meticulosa en su atención por el detalle cabal e iluminador, y un certero instinto de artesano de las palabras. Seguro de su arte, se instala en Fontainebleau con la intención de escribir su obra maestra. Según cuenta en su diario, y reproduce con variantes en el Prefacio a la obra[15], la inspiración le vino una noche de invierno, cuando al llegar a la mesa de su restaurante habitual, la encontró ocupada por una mujer de mediana edad, un tanto obesa y poco agraciada. Esbozó entonces un posible título en su mente: «La Historia de dos Viejas». Pero para escribir su obra maestra necesitaba cierto orden y domesticidad. Intentó conseguirlo tras entablar una relación con una joven americana, Eleanor Green, que no duró demasiado. Poco después se casó con una joven francesa, la actriz Marguerite Soulié, y el matrimonio duró, con altibajos, hasta 1921. Alquilaron una casa en Les Sablons, con la buena fortuna de que los dueños eran un matrimonio mayor cuyos recuerdos se remontaban hasta el sitio de París de 1870, lo cual constituyó una fuente y una referencia inestimables para la sección parisina de la novela, aunque, como cuenta el propio escritor en el Prefacio a la obra, la experiencia de los ancianos no hizo sino confirmarle en su intuición original, que los grandes acontecimientos de la historia muy frecuentemente corren paralelos tan sólo a la historia del propio combate vital y personal: «Parecía que sólo le concedían importancia al sitio de París, que habían vivido como testigos, por el simple hecho de que yo les interrogara sobre el mismo. Como si hubieran sido meramente habitantes de un pueblo pintoresco»[16]. Fuere lo que fuere, la tranquilidad doméstica y el entorno propiciaron que en tan sólo once meses —en los que también escribió relatos, obras de teatro y una guía acerca del gusto literario, además de innumerables artículos y una brillante novela cómica, *Buried Alive [“Enterrado vivo”*]— consiguiera terminar las dos mil palabras de su obra maestra definitiva sobre una pareja de ancianas.

Aunque es, sin duda, un clásico contemporáneo y su mejor obra, Bennett no por eso abandonó su copiosa actividad de escritura en la doble vertiente, “seria” y “popular” o “sensacional”, como él gustaba de llamarla, aunque en ocasiones resulte difícil delimitar la una de la otra, como es el caso de *Sacred and Profane Love [“Amor sagrado y profano”],* acerca de una “mujer apasionada”, que quizá constituya una de las peores obras escritas por un gran novelista. *Leonora* y *Whom God Hath Joined* [“*Los que Dios ha unido”]* constituyen sendos estudios de matrimonios fallidos, un tema muy querido por Bennett y que vivió personalmente, porque su propio matrimonio hacía aguas al tiempo que iniciaba una larga relación con la actriz Dorothy Cheston. Pero el *Cuento de Viejas* le abre la puerta de su filón más imaginativo, al que ya nos hemos referido más arriba, reunido en 1925 como *The Clayhanger Family [“La familia Clayhanger”].* Cuando viaja a Estados Unidos en 1911 su sólida reputación está completamente asentada y a la altura de los grandes, como Henry James o H. G. Wells, su colega generacional.

La Primera Guerra Mundial, que constituyó, sin duda, una profunda cesura no sólo histórica sino también literaria en Gran Bretaña[17], marcó profundamente a Bennett. Volvió a Inglaterra definitivamente y entró a trabajar en el Bureau de Inteligencia y Propaganda, junto con escritores como Chesterton, Conan Doyle, Hardy, Kipling y Wells. Su primer ensayo en este nuevo género propagandístico fue *Liberty: a statement of the British Case [“La libertad: un manifiesto británico”],* publicado serialmente en las páginas del *Saturday Evening Post* en Estados Unidos antes de aparecer como libro. El libro, o panfleto, según algunos, desató las iras de George Bernard Shaw por lo que consideraba un peligroso patrioterismo y chauvinismo vulgar y mendaz. Hay que tener en cuenta que la Gran Guerra provocó en los medios literarios ingleses un debate importante y un gran movimiento de objeción de conciencia, uno de cuyos máximos líderes fue Bertrand Russell, que incluso sufrió una estancia en la cárcel. Asimismo, los denominados «poetas de la Guerra», como Richard Owen, Siegfried Sassoon y Rosenberg, demolieron en sus poemas bélicos, tras su experiencia del Somme, la grandilocuencia y autosatisfacción de la idea imperial británica, que, según ellos, había conducido a la guerra, dando paso tanto al clima generalizado de desilusión y cinismo postbélico como a la introducción de las vanguardias literarias. Arnold Bennett visitó el frente occidental en junio de 1915 y el horror que contempló hizo tanta mella en su persona que enfermó físicamente. Más tarde, sin embargo, accedió a escribir *Over there: War Scenes on the Western Front [“Allí lejos: escenas de guerra del frente de Occidente*”] (1915), que constituye en realidad casi una llamada a filas. Sin embargo, en dos novelas posteriores, *The Roll-Call [“Pasando lista”]* y, sobre todo, *The Pretty Lady [“La hermosa dama”],* ambas de 1918, trató con buena dosis de piedad y horror el tema bélico.

Asentado definitivamente en Inglaterra y tras iniciar una larga relación con Dorothy Cheston de la que nacería su hija Virginia, siguió escribiendo a caballo entre la realidad y el sensacionalismo popular, sin olvidar jamás su veta originaria de alfarero rural en novelas como *The Card ["La tarjeta de visita"]* (1911) y *The Price of Love* ["El *precio del amor"] (*1914). Así, junto a la insufrible *Mr Prohack* (1922) encontramos *Riceyman Steps* ["Los *pasos de Riceyman"*](1923), uno de sus grandes logros en el magnífico retrato del avaro que nos brinda. *Lord Raingo* (1926) es el retrato perverso de un hombre público, mientras que en *Imperial Palace* (1920), a pesar de una cierta vulgaridad, apunta ya en su protagonista, Gracie Savott, la figura de la *flapper*[18] cínica e icónica que va a presidir la narrativa de los años veinte y de la siguiente generación. Su desbordante actividad le llevó asimismo a escribir más de quince obras de teatro y a producir, junto con Sir Nigel Playfair y Alistair Tayler, la programación del Lyric Theatre de Londres, en la época de mayor esplendor social del mismo. Y como venimos insistiendo, en su polifacética pluma tendremos que consignar también sus múltiples obras de variado pelaje y consistencia, desde la autoayuda, por ejemplo en *Self and Self-Management* (1918) o *The Reasonable Life, Being Hints at Men and Women* (1911), los consejos literarios en *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (1909), libros de viaje como *Those United States* (1912) o *Mediterranean Scenes: Rome, Greece, Constantinople* (1928), hasta, una vez más, la cuestión de la mujer en *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord* (1920).

Murió el 27 de mayo de 1931. Su carrera fue dilatada y le convirtió en contemporáneo de autores y poéticas tan diferentes como las de Thomas Hardy, Henry James, George Gissing, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, Conan Doyle, D. H. Lawrence o Ezra Pound. Pero aunque conoció *y* se formó en el pesimismo y la duda de la tardía era Victoriana, y aunque se iniciara con algún relato en el decadente *The Yellow Book,* órgano del esteticismo wildeano, generacionalmente la historia literaria le ha fijado, junto con Galsworthy y Wells, como un escritor edwardiano; esto es, ese *verano indio,* esa época de transición que media entre la muerte de la reina Victoria y la coronación de Jorge V, que inaugura, con los georgianos, y junto con la Gran Guerra, el acceso de la Isla a la modernidad y la vanguardia.

Lo mejor de su obra, sin duda, corresponde a los años de madurez previos a 1914, y el *Cuento de Viejas* es su obra maestra indiscutible. Como dice Frazer en *The Modem Writer and His World,* sus novelas constituyen un «epítome del *ethos* burgués» porque «en la historia cultural y política inglesa, el período edwardiano es la edad de oro de las clases medias»[19]. Los años veinte, con la irrupción moderna de Joyce, Beckett, Lawrence, Woolf, Mansfield, asestaron un duro golpe a la narrativa «realista» de Bennett y a los valores que ésta defendía y englobaba y fue, curiosamente, el *Cuento de Viejas* el gozne en el que se ensartó la polémica e incluso el manifiesto de la nueva escritura y la nueva generación. Ezra Pound, que convirtió a Bennett en el aclamado escritor de best-sellers populares, Mr Nixon, en su poema «Hugh Selwyn Mauberley», escribió:

> hasta donde yo alcanzo a entender no existe en Inglaterra otra moralidad que no sea de una u otra forma una manifestación del sentido de la propiedad privada. Una cosa está bien si contribuye a mantener un patrimonio o a preservar una herencia o una sucesión, sin importar qué tipo de servidumbre o de opresión lleva consigo[20].

y no podemos por menos que afirmar que la propiedad —en su doble acepción— es el eje que vertebra el doble retrato que constituye el *Cuento de Viejas.*

CUENTO DE VIEJAS O «LA QUERELLA CON LOS MODERNOS»

Virginia Woolf publicó en el *Times Literary Supplement*, el 10 de abril de 1919, un ensayo que bajo el título de «Novelas Modernas»[21] trataba de presentar un fresco de la situación contemporánea de la narrativa en su país, a la vez que, en la constante querella que produce cada generación literaria, defendía las nuevas prácticas «modernistas» narrativas de su propia escritura, junto con la de un todavía no canonizado Sr James Joyce. El ensayo, que posteriormente fue reelaborado, constituye toda una declaración combativa de principios, y sus palabras archicitadas han constituido un manifiesto de una nueva realidad, cambiante, mudable, contingente, subjetiva, que ya no se deja modelar —por incierta— según los parámetros del realismo convencional. En el citado artículo, Virginia Woolf califica a Arnold Bennett —junto a sus contemporáneos John Galsworthy y H. G. Wells— de escritores «materialistas», por su atención al detalle y a un realismo o naturalismo de superficies, y propone, en contra, una visión esquinada de un realismo ya trufado no sólo por

la subjetividad del espectador, sino por una conciencia subjetiva del tiempo y una valoración de la incertidumbre del espacio. Quizá lo más interesante desde la perspectiva actual sea no tanto el discurso crítico respecto al realismo propuesto al inicio de la vanguardia inglesa, sino que sea precisamente la articulación de un nuevo realismo la que abre las puertas al monólogo interior y a las distintas formas de quebrar el tiempo subjetivo y la corriente de conciencia. No tanto, o no sólo, una cuestión meramente formal, sino una nueva forma como exigencia de contenido o, sobre todo, de significado, cuando es la propia realidad postbélica la que ha venido a estallar el mundo del escritor y sus lectores. Las palabras de Virginia Woolf, archicitadas, son consideradas, por muchos, un manifiesto de la nueva literatura:

> Nuestra pelea no es con los clásicos, y si hablamos de nuestra pelea con el Sr Wells, el Sr Bennett y el Sr Galsworthy, es porque su mera existencia camal concede a sus obras una imperfección real, viva, cotidiana que nos lleva a nosotros a tomar una serie de libertades [...] Cuando queremos definir el elemento que distingue la obra de algunos de los escritores jóvenes, entre los cuales se encuentra el Sr. James Joyce, nos vemos obligados a destacar que intentan aproximarse lo más posible a aquello que constituye la vida así como proteger de la forma más sincera y exacta aquello que les interesa y emociona, abandonando muchas de las convenciones que siguen la mayoría de los novelistas. Registremos los átomos tal y como inciden en nuestra mente, registremos el orden en el que penetran en la misma, dibujemos el movimiento y las formas que cada visión o cada incidente traza en nuestra conciencia, por más que nos parezcan inconexos e incoherentes. No demos por sentado que la vida existe en lo que consideramos grandes acontecimientos más que en lo que tradicionalmente se ha venido considerando menor [...]

Y hablando directamente del autor de *Cuento de Viejas,* afirma:

> Sus personajes llevan una vida profusa, incluso inesperada, pero seguimos sin saber cómo viven o para qué viven. Conforme pasan los años seguimos viendo cómo incluso abandonan sus acomodadas villas de las Cinco Ciudades para pasar el tiempo en un vagón de ferrocarril equipado con múltiples timbres y campanas; y el destino hacia el que se encaminan con tanto lujo no parece otra cosa que una eternidad feliz y aburrida en el mejor hotel de Brighton [...]

Y tras definir su práctica narrativa y su visión de la realidad como mediocre, continúa:

> ¿No será acaso que la vida ya no es así como nos la presentan? ¿No será que el acento de la vida recae ahora en un ámbito diferente, que la importancia del momento quizá sea otra, que si uno fuera libre y pudiera escoger libremente, no habría argumento, ni tampoco probabilidad, y una vaga confusión en la que los rasgos de lo trágico, de lo cómico, de lo pasional y de lo lírico se disolverían en un todo que haría imposible que los reconociéramos? La mente, expuesta como está al curso ordinario de la vida, recibe un millón de impresiones externas —triviales, fantásticas, evanescentes, y también grabadas con el rigor y el filo del acero—. Llegan de todas partes y de todos los extremos, una lluvia incesante de átomos innumerables que componen todos juntos lo que nos aventuramos a llamar vida. La vida es un halo luminoso, un envoltorio semitransparente [...][22].

La polémica, así, estaba servida, y de esta forma el *Cuento de Viejas* vino a constituirse en piedra de toque de un cierto realismo, denominado y denostado como «materialista», contra el que se produce —en una versión de la «ansiedad de la influencia» de la que nos hablara Harold Bloom— la nueva narrativa moderna de Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, *et al.*

Y es que si tuviéramos que perfilar la nota dominante de esta la obra más notable de Bennett, efectivamente tendríamos que apuntar esa solidez material y naturalista con la que da vida al territorio de su infancia, que se revela en la atención que concede a la profusión del detalle que conforma un paisaje real y moral. Hablando de la misma, Henry James escribía:

> el lienzo está cubierto de forma tan profusa y tan vividamente abigarrada por la exhibición de una serie innumerable de aspectos y hechos pequeños, que constituye un monumento exacto, pero no a una idea, ni a un determinado significado que se persigue y que se consigue captar, ni tampoco a cualquier cosa que sea sino, sencillamente, un monumento a lo cuasireal.

Se trata de conseguir una exactitud en el trazo del lienzo que procede más por acumulación que por selección, con la que Bennett trata de ser fiel a su descubrimiento naturalista del Zola de *L'Assomoir* ["El *matadero"]*. El autor consigue así dar vida al fresco de la provincia inglesa a lo largo de cincuenta años con exactitud casi fotográfica. Cuando asistimos a la visita de un circo que revoluciona la pequeña ciudad de Bursley, Bennett está actuando con la minuciosidad de un reportero que narra la visita real e histórica del circo Barnum a su ciudad natal; cuando suben los precios de los paños en la tienda de los Baines, el autor no hace sino constatar la influencia que la Guerra Civil en Estados Unidos y el consiguiente bloqueo marítimo tuvo sobre los precios del algodón. Lo mismo puede decirse de las ejecuciones tras sendas sentencias de pena capital, así como la meticulosa reproducción de la vida en París durante la Comuna y tras el desastre de Sedán. Pero, como siempre ocurre, esta necesidad formal no es sólo una elección técnica, sino que corresponde al tema central de la novela, a esa resignación ante el devenir y las fuerzas externas que impiden que la vida personal adquiera brillo o relevancia o se deje modificar por la decisión o la voluntad individual. Se trata de un realismo que en Bennett es consustancial al *ethos* de esa clase media que conforma su visión. De la misma manera, la proliferación objetual y material corresponde a esa definición de interiores llenos y agobiantes, a ese ambiente viciado de respetabilidad donde la conciencia individual apenas puede respirar en libertad.

El segundo eje en el que se articula la novela es el de la creación caracteriológica[23]. Efectivamente, los personajes de las dos hermanas Sofía y Constanza Baines, convierten lo que en principio es una crónica de los avatares de la historia en un profundo retrato vital de lo que supone crecer y hacerse viejo. Vivir, en suma, como mujer en la historia real y local de la segunda mitad del XIX. Apuntábamos más arriba la génesis de la obra en una circunstancia concreta vivida por el autor y consignada en su diario. El autor es aún más explícito todavía en el Prefacio a la obra:

> En el otoño de 1903 yo cenaba con frecuencia en un restaurante en la Rue de Clichy, en París. [...] entró en el restaurante a cenar una mujer de edad. Era gorda, informe, fea y grotesca. Tenía una voz ridícula y hacía gestos ridículos. Se veía fácilmente que vivía sola y que en el transcurso de muchos años había desarrollado el tipo de rareza que suscita la carcajada de los desconsiderados. Iba cargada con multitud de paquetitos que se le estaban siempre cayendo. Eligió un sitio y después, como no le gustó, otro, y luego otro. En pocos momentos tenía a todo el restaurante riéndose de ella. [...] Reflexioné acerca de aquella grotesca cena. «Esa mujer fue una vez joven y delgada, quizá bella; desde luego no tenía ese ridículo amaneramiento. Es muy probable que no se dé cuenta de sus rarezas. Su caso es una tragedia. La historia de una mujer como ella da materia para una novela desgarradora». No es que todas las mujeres gordas y viejas sean grotescas, ¡nada de eso!, pero hay un extremado patetismo en el simple hecho de que todas las mujeres gordas y viejas fueron una vez muchachas con el singular encanto de la juventud en su figura y sus movimientos y en su espíritu. Y el hecho de que el paso de la muchacha a la mujer gorda y vieja esté compuesto por un número infinito de cambios infinitesimales, ninguno de los cuales ella llega a percibir, no hace sino intensificar ese patetismo [...] Además, siempre me había rebelado contra la absurda juventud, contra la inmarchitable juventud de la heroína al uso. Y como protesta contra esa moda, ya en 1903 estaba planeando una novela *(Leonora)* cuya heroína tenía cuarenta años y sus hijas eran lo bastante mayores como para estar enamoradas. Los críticos, dicho sea de paso, se quedaron estupefactos ante mi audacia de ofrecer al público a una mujer de cuarenta años como tema de interés serio. ¡Pero yo me proponía ir mucho más allá de los cuarenta años! En última instancia, como razón suprema, tenía el ejemplo y el reto de *Une vie,* de Guy de Maupassant. En la década de 1890 considerábamos *Une vie* con muda veneración, como la cima del logro en la ficción [...] Me han acusado de todos los defectos menos de falta de confianza en mí mismo, y en pocas semanas decidí otra cosa, a saber, que mi libro tenía que «ir más lejos» que *Une vie* y que con este objeto tenía que ser la historia de la vida de dos mujeres en vez de una sola. Por lo tanto, *Cuento de Viejas* tiene dos heroínas. Constanza es la original; Sofía fue creada por hacer una bravata [...] Me intimidaba la osadía de mi proyecto, pero me había jurado sacarlo adelante. [...] Escribí la primera parte de la novela en seis semanas. Me resultó muy fácil porque en los años setenta, la primera década de mi vida, había vivido en la auténtica mercería de los Baines *y* la conocía como sólo un niño podía conocerla.

Creo que las palabras del autor son absolutamente esclarecedoras del tema y personajes. La mirada y el oído de Bennett se detienen con compasión y simpatía en cada uno de ese «número infinito de ligeros e imperceptibles cambios infinitesimales» que constituyen el proceso de envejecimiento de sus heroínas. Querría destacar, sin embargo, el logro que supone el desdoblamiento de la heroína por cuanto que concede, no sólo más vitalidad a la novela, sino también más profundidad y complejidad a ese *pathos* ineluctable que constituye su tema central. Porque, efectivamente, la vida de Constanza, nacida en Bursley, en la tienda de paños, casada en Bursley, con el oficial asistente de la tienda, Povys, repite inexorablemente lo que el destino y su circunstancia le han venido preparando desde la noche de los tiempos. Ha internalizado hasta tal punto las normas y juicios de su clase y de su ética que ni se plantea la posibilidad de una alternativa. Es más, todo cambio en las seguridades adquiridas de su infancia le supone no sólo una contrariedad, sino también enormes dosis de ansiedad. Pero en el retrato de su hermana Sofía, las cosas, parece, pudieran haber sido distintas dentro de una óptica no necesariamente naturalista. Porque Sofía, desde el comienzo se nos presenta como la antítesis de Constanza. Es guapa, es lista, brillante, con la imaginación del romance en su mente, y, sobre todo, con el convencimiento de que hay otros mundos posibles, de que hay otras existencias seductoras, más allá de las paredes del comercio familiar y de la vida monótona de su pequeña ciudad. Es una mujer, hasta cierto punto, nueva, que imagina una existencia independiente en Londres. No sólo eso, es una mujer que haciendo gala de su independencia abandona las Cinco Ciudades para fugarse con un novio cuyo amor es más imaginado que real a Londres y a París. (Fuga, eso sí, más burguesa que aventurera, en el sentido de que el matrimonio inmediato y previo a toda relación amorosa es condición *sine qua non* de la fuga y del temperamento, en el fondo sólidamente burgués, de nuestra heroína.) Con ello consigue Bennett, no sólo dotar de dramatismo a la trama de la obra, sino acentuar su *pesimismo* sobre la condición humana. Porque París, en 1870, es ya la metrópolis cosmopolita de la modernidad, tal y como la *cantará* Baudelaire en *Las Flores del Mal:* representa un universo de posibilidades infinitas que contrasta radicalmente con el microcosmos inmutable cerrado por el humo que pesa. Y sin embargo, el destino mágico de Sofía tampoco se cumple. La magia de París, fuera de la solidez de un matrimonio como el de Constanza, pronto se evapora en hoteluchos y pensiones, sin que, por otra parte, Sofía sea capaz de convertirse en auténtica protagonista de la Historia que se vive en el París de la Comuna, de Sedán y del establecimiento de la Tercera República. Abandonada finalmente, deshonrada también, Sofía acaba aplicando en París los mismos principios de laboriosidad, frugalidad, ahorro, sentido común y olvido de los sentidos que presiden la vida en el Bursley de su infancia. Y entre sedas y modelos parisinos, y tras convivir y aprender —sin mancillarse— de las prostitutas y entretenidas del París de *La educación sentimental* flaubertiana, acaba envejeciendo y perdiendo también su frescura en el establecimiento y dirección de una «Pensión Inglesa» de reputación intachable. Casi podemos ver a los personajes de E. M. Forster en *Una habitación con vistas* en la pensión dirigida férreamente por Sofía Baines. Por más que su rebelión juvenil fuera sincera, no consigue un destino muy diferente del de su hermana Constanza. Nunca llega a entender ni el esteticismo de un cierto universo parisino, ni esa *douceur de vivre* que pretende atrapar lo que de atractivo pueda tener la vida, como si la estrechez vital de su educación metodista le impidiera adentrarse en caminos donde «los ángeles no se atreven a hollar», esto es, fuera de los límites de esa respetabilidad victoriana. Inicia una carrera a lo Molí Flanders, como tantas heroínas que nos brinda la tradición narrativa, singularmente la inglesa, mujeres perdidas en amores extramatrimoniales y en fugas novelescas, pero acaba, como su hermana Constanza —que por no moverse, no abandonó nunca la casa y la tienda familiar, entre cuyos muros encontró a su marido y estableció su hogar, vieja, perdida la juventud y también todo tipo de ilusión acerca de una vida con sentido. Pero también rica, con un importante patrimonio —. Y al llegar aquí me permito recordar las palabras citadas más arriba acerca de la propiedad privada como *ethos* fundamental de las clases medias y de su versión narrativa.

Más allá de la crónica detallada, con un agudo sentido del humor, sobre todo en los episodios ingleses, y con una afilada mirada para descubrir el detalle significativo, la visión de Bennett es tremendamente pesimista. Y es que envejecer es duro. Pero aún lo es más cuando ni siquiera existe la posibilidad de imaginar alternativas de pálpito vital, que ya no de felicidad, que es lo que el autor parece decirnos. Estamos acostumbrados a considerar que la madurez es un elemento positivo, una realización en el mejor de los casos. Bennett no parece considerarlo así: sólo es un momento detenido en el patético proceso hacia nuestra desaparición, proceso en el que nuestra pretendida voluntad de decisión y de creación es sencillamente una ilusión necesaria que nos contamos para paliar el dolor de nuestra contingencia. «El pesimismo, cuando te acostumbras, resulta tan agradable como el optimismo» es una de las frases más citadas de nuestro autor.

Ese es el relato que Bennett nos ofrece en esta obra, al compás de la Historia. Su fuerza estriba, además de en la maestría técnica por el detalle y la observación que apuntábamos más arriba, junto con la elaborada estructura dicotómica, en espejo, tanto de los personajes como de la arquitectura narrativa, en la cualidad y sinceridad de la experiencia de la contingencia que el autor nos ofrece y en el *pathos* con el que articula la banalidad de la existencia de sus personajes. Porque, en sus propias palabras, «no hay conocimiento sin emoción. Podemos saber de la existencia de una verdad, pero hasta que no hemos sentido su fuerza en nosotros, esa verdad no la hacemos nuestra. Al conocimiento y a la inteligencia debemos adjuntar la experiencia del alma».

CRONOLOGÍA

1867 Enoch Arnold Bennett nace el 27 de mayo en Hanley (Staffordshire).

1875 Los Bennett se establecen en Burslem.

1889 Arnold Bennett marcha a Londres en marzo. Trabaja en el despacho Le Brasseur &r Oakley.

1891 Gana el premio de *Tit-Bits,* veinte guineas; es el primer dinero que gana con la literatura.

1893 Es subdirector de la revista *Woman,* un semanario «para la mujer moderna». Gana ciento cincuenta libras, cincuenta menos que en el despacho, pero tiene tiempo libre para escribir.

1895 Animado por la acogida de sus relatos breves, empieza A *Man from the North,* su primera novela.

1896 Su primer viaje al extranjero (Bélgica). Director de *Woman.* Viaje en bicicleta al norte de Francia; luego, viaje a París.

1898 *A Man from the North; Formalism for Women.*

1900 Deja *Woman* en septiembre. Se instala en Bedforshire.

1901 *Fame and Fiction.*

1902 *Anne of the Five Towns; The Grand Babylon Hotel.*

1903 Se instala en Tours en abril; en junio hace un viaje a Inglaterra y en septiembre se traslada a París. *Leonora; The Gates of Wrath; The Truth about an Author.*

1904 *A Great Man; Teresa of Watling Street.*

1905 *Tales of the Five Towns; Sacred and Profane Love; The Loot of Cities.*

1906 Noviazgo con Eleanor Green, hermana de Julien Green; ruptura a los pocos meses. *Whom God Hath Joined; Hugo; The Sinews of War; Things that Interested Me.*

1907 Se casa en julio con Marguerite Soulié. En octubre empieza a escribir *Cuento de Viejas.* Se instala en Avon-Fontainebleau. *The Ghost; The Reasonable Life; The Grim Smile of the Five Towns; The City of Pleasure; Things Which Have Interested Me, Second Series.*

1908 Viaje a Italia en septiembre. *Cuento de Viejas; Buried Alive; The Human Machine; The Statue; How to Live Twenty-Four Hours a Day; Things Which Have Interested Me, Third Series.*

1909 *The Glimpse; Literary Taste.*

1910 *Clayhanger; Helen with the High Hand.*

1911 Viaje a Estados Unidos en octubre. *The Card; Hilda Lessways; The Feast of St. Friend.*

1912 *The Matador of the Five Towns; Your United States.*

1913 *The Regent; The Plain Man and his Wife; Paris Nights.*

1914 *The Prince of Love; Liberty; From the Log of the Velsa*.

1915 Regresa a Inglaterra. Inicia su colaboración en la guerra; el servicio oficial de información lo envía a Francia a visitar el frente. *The Author's Craft; Over There.*

1916 Inicia el ciclo de las «novelas de Londres», aunque las Cinco Ciudades seguirán siendo el escenario dominante. *The Twain; The Lion's Share.*

1917 *Books and Persons.*

1918 Es nombrado Director de Propaganda. *The Pretty Lady; Self and Self-Management.*

1919 *The Roll-Call.*

1920 *Our Women.*

1921 Se separa de su mujer.

1922 Conoce a Dorothy Cheston, con la que no podrá casarse porque su mujer le niega el divorcio. *Mr. Prohack; Lilian.*

1923 *Riceyman Steps; How to Make the Best of Life.*

1924 *Elsie and the Child.*

1926 Nace su hija Virginia. *Lord Raingo.*

1927 *The Woman Who Stole Everything.*

1928 *The Strange Vanguard; The Savour of Life; Mediterranean Scenes.*

1929 *Accident; The Religious Interregnum; Piccadilly; Journal, 1929.*

1930 *Imperial Palace.*

1931 Muere de tifus el 27 de marzo, en Londres. *The Night* Visitor; *The Journal of Arnold Bennett (1932-33)*

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CUENTO DE VIEJAS

Prefacio

En el otoño de 1903 yo cenaba con frecuencia en un restaurante en la Rue de Clichy, en París. Allí había, entre otras personas, dos camareras que me llamaban la atención. Una era una hermosa y pálida muchacha con la que nunca hablé, pues servía lejos de la mesa a la que yo acostumbraba sentarme. La otra, una corpulenta y emprendedora bretona de mediana edad, mandaba en mi mesa de forma exclusiva y poco a poco fue adoptando conmigo un tono tan maternal que vi que iba a tener que dejar de ir al restaurante. Si faltaba un par de noches seguidas me reprochaba con aspereza: «¡Vaya! ¿Conque me es infiel?». Una vez, cuando me quejé de unas judías francesas, me hizo saber categóricamente que las judías francesas eran un tema del que yo no entendía. Entonces decidí serle eternamente infiel y abandoné el restaurante. Pocas noches antes de marcharme definitivamente, entró en el restaurante a cenar una mujer de edad. Era gorda, informe, fea y grotesca. Tenía una voz ridícula y hacía gestos ridículos. Se veía fácilmente que vivía sola y que en el transcurso de muchos años había desarrollado el tipo de rareza que suscita la carcajada de los desconsiderados. Iba cargada con multitud de paquetitos que se le estaban siempre cayendo. Eligió un sitio y después, como no le gustó, otro, y luego otro. En pocos momentos tenía a todo el restaurante riéndose de ella. Que mi bretona de mediana edad se riera de ella me era indiferente, pero me dolió ver una grosera mueca de burla en la cara de la joven y hermosa camarera con la que nunca había hablado.

Reflexioné acerca de aquella grotesca cena. «Esa mujer fue una vez joven y delgada, quizá bella; desde luego no tenía ese ridículo amaneramiento. Es muy probable que no se dé cuenta de sus rarezas. Su caso es una tragedia. La historia de una mujer como ella da materia para una novela desgarradora». No es que todas las mujeres gordas y viejas sean grotescas, ¡nada de eso!, pero hay un extremado patetismo en el simple hecho de que todas las mujeres gordas y viejas fueron una vez muchachas con el singular encanto de la juventud en su figura y sus movimientos y en su espíritu. Y el hecho de que el paso de la muchacha a la mujer gorda y vieja esté compuesto por un número infinito de cambios infinitesimales, ninguno de los cuales ella llega a percibir, no hace sino intensificar ese patetismo.

Fue en aquel instante cuando acudió a mi mente la idea de escribir el libro que andando el tiempo sería *Cuento de Viejas.* Desde luego pensé que la mujer que había causado el innoble regocijo en el restaurante no me serviría como tipo de heroína, pues era demasiado vieja y evidentemente antipática. Es una norma absoluta que el protagonista de una novela no debe ser antipático; las tendencias de la ficción realista van en su totalidad en contra de la rareza en un personaje destacado. Yo sabía que tenía que elegir una clase de mujer que pasara inadvertida en una muchedumbre.

Dejé de lado la idea durante largo tiempo, pero nunca estuvo muy lejos de mí. Por diversas razones, me atraía especialmente. Yo siempre había sido un convencido admirador de la más preciada novela de la señora W. K. Clifford, *La tía Anne,* pero quería ver en la historia de una mujer anciana muchas cosas que la señora W. K. Clifford había omitido en *La tía Anne.* Además, siempre me había rebelado contra la absurda juventud, contra la inmarchitable juventud de la heroína al uso. Y como protesta contra esta moda, ya en 1903 estaba planeando una novela *(Leonora)* cuya heroína tenía cuarenta años y sus hijas eran lo bastante mayores como para estar enamoradas. Los críticos, dicho sea de paso, se quedaron estupefactos ante mi audacia de ofrecer al público a una mujer de cuarenta años como tema de interés serio. ¡Pero yo me proponía ir mucho más allá de los cuarenta años! En última instancia, como razón suprema, tenía el ejemplo y el reto de *Une vie,* de Guy de Maupassant. En la década de 1890 considerábamos *Une vie* con muda veneración, como la cima del logro en la ficción. Y recuerdo que estaba muy enojado con Bernard Shaw porque, tras leer *Une vie* por sugerencia (creo) de William Archer, no halló en ella nada notable. Debo confesar aquí que en 1908 volví a leer *Une vie* y, a pesar de mi natural deseo de discrepar de la opinión de Bernard Shaw, me sentí muy decepcionado. Es una excelente novela, pero claramente inferior a *Pierre et Jean* e incluso a *Fort comme la Mort.* Pero volvamos al año 1903. *Une vie* relata toda la vida de una mujer. En mi fuero interno decidí que mi libro sobre la evolución de una muchacha hasta convertirse en una mujer vieja y gorda había de ser la *Une vie* inglesa. Me han acusado de todos los defectos menos de falta de confianza en mí mismo, y en pocas semanas decidí otra cosa, a saber, que mi libro tenía que «ir más lejos» que *Une vie* y que con este objeto tenía que ser la historia de la vida de dos mujeres en vez de una sola. Por lo tanto, *Cuento de Viejas* tiene dos heroínas. Constanza *es* la original; Sofía fue creada por hacer una bravata, sólo para indicar que me negaba a considerar a Guy de Maupassant como el último precursor del diluvio. Me intimidaba la osadía de mi proyecto, pero me había jurado sacarlo adelante. Durante varios años lo miraba directamente a la cara a intervalos, y luego me apartaba para escribir novelas de menor porte, de las cuales produje cinco o seis. Pero no podía estar siempre tomándolo y dejándolo, y en el otoño de 1907 me puse a escribir de verdad, en un pueblo cerca de Fontainebleau donde alquilé media casa a un ferroviario jubilado. Calculaba que la novela tendría 200.000

palabras (cálculo que resultó exacto) y tenía la vaga idea de que ninguna novela de semejantes dimensiones (excepto la de Richardson) se había escrito antes. Así que conté las palabras de varias famosas novelas victorianas y descubrí, con alivio, que las famosas novelas victorianas tenían por término medio 400.000 palabras cada una. Escribí la primera parte de la novela en seis semanas. Me resultó muy fácil porque en los años setenta, la primera década de mi vida, había vivido en la auténtica mercería de los Baines y la conocía como sólo un niño podía conocerla. Después fui a Londres de visita. Traté de continuar el libro en un hotel londinense» pero Londres me distraía demasiado y lo dejé; entre enero y febrero de 1908 escribí *Enterrado vivo,* que se publicó inmediatamente y fue recibido con majestuosa indiferencia por el público inglés, una indiferencia que ha persistido hasta este día.

Luego volví a la región de Fontainebleau y no dejé descansar *Cuento de Viejas* hasta que lo terminé, a finales de julio de 1908. Se publicó en el otoño del mismo año y durante las seis semanas siguientes el público inglés confirmó una opinión expresada por cierta persona en cuyo juicio yo tenía confianza, según la cual, la obra era sincera pero triste y que cuando no era triste mostraba una lamentable tendencia a la guasa. Mis editores, aunque hombres de agallas, estaban un poco desalentados; sin embargo, la acogida del libro se fue haciendo cada vez menos fría.

Con respecto a la parte francesa del relato, no fue hasta que hube escrito la primera parte cuando vi, al estudiar mi base cronológica, que se podía introducir en la narración el asedio de París. La idea era seductora; pero yo aborrecía, y sigo aborreciendo, las horribles tareas de la investigación, y sólo conocía el París del siglo veinte. Entonces caí en la cuenta de que mi ferroviario y su esposa habían vivido en París en la época de la guerra. Le dije al viejo: «Por cierto, ¿usted vivió el sitio de París, verdad?». Se volvió a su mujer y dijo, inseguro: «¿El sitio de París? Sí, estuvimos, ¿no?». El sitio de París no había sido más que un incidente entre muchos en sus vidas. Por supuesto, lo recordaban bien, aunque no vividamente, y obtuve de ellos mucha información. Pero lo más útil que obtuve de ellos fue la percepción, sorprendente al principio, de que la gente corriente siguió llevando una vida muy corriente en París durante el asedio, y que para la gran mayoría de la población el asedio no fue el asunto dramático, espectacular, emocionante y extático que se describe en la Historia. Animado por esta percepción, decidí incluir el asedio de París en mi plan. Leí en voz alta a mi mujer el diario del sitio escrito por Sarcey, vi las ilustraciones de la popular obra de Jean Claretie sobre el sitio y la comuna y eché un vistazo a la colección impresa de documentos oficiales, y allí concluyó mi investigación.

Se ha aseverado que a menos que hubiese presenciado una ejecución pública no habría podido escribir el capítulo en el que Sofía se halla en el acto solemne de Auxerre. No he presenciado una ejecución pública y la totalidad de mi información sobre ejecuciones públicas procede de una serie de artículos sobre el particular que leí en el *Matin* de París. Frank Harris, en su reseña de mi libro en *Vanity Fair,* decía que estaba claro que yo no había visto una ejecución (con estas o parecidas palabras), y pasaba a dar su propia descripción de una ejecución. Era un pasaje breve pero terriblemente convincente, del todo característico y digno del autor de *Montes el matador* y de un hombre que ha estado en casi todas partes y ha visto de casi todo. ¡Comprendí cuán lejos me había quedado yo de la realidad! Escribí a Frank Harris lamentando que su descripción no se hubiese publicado antes de redactar yo la mía, ya que con toda seguridad la hubiera utilizado, y, por supuesto, admití que nunca había sido testigo de una ejecución. Me contestó simplemente: «Yo tampoco». Merece la pena conservar este detalle, pues constituye una reprensión para la gran cantidad de lectores que, cuando un novelista les parece verdaderamente convincente, afirman de inmediato: «¡Oh, seguro que eso es autobiográfico!».

ARNOLD BENNETT

Libro I

LA SEÑORA BAINES

Capitulo I

LA PLAZA

I

Aquellas dos muchachas, Constanza y Sofía, no prestaban atención alguna a los múltiples puntos de interés de su situación, de la cual, por lo demás, nunca habían sido conscientes. Por ejemplo, se hallaban casi exactamente en el paralelo cincuenta y tres de latitud. Un poco al norte de ellas, en los pliegues de una colina famosa por sus divertimentos religiosos, nacía el río Trent, la tranquila y característica corriente de la Inglaterra central. Algo más hacia el norte, en las proximidades de la taberna más alta de la región, nacían dos ríos menores, el Dane y el Dove, que, habiéndose peleado en su primera infancia, se volvían la espalda y, el uno gracias al Weaver y el otro gracias al Trent, regaban en medio de ellos toda la extensión de Inglaterra y desembocaban en el Mar de Irlanda y en el Océano Alemán respectivamente. ¡Qué condado aquel con sus modestos e inadvertidos ríos! ¡Qué condado tan sencillo y natural, contento de fijar sus límites por medio de aquellos tortuosos arroyos isleños con sus incómodos nombres: Trent, Mease, Dove, Tern, Dane, Mees, Stour, Tame, e incluso el precipitado Severn! Claro está que el Severn no es propio para este condado. En él los excesos están mal vistos. Lo que le gusta es no ser motivo de comentarios. Se conforma con que Shropshire posea esa hinchada protuberancia, el Wrekin, y con que el exagerado aire agreste del Pico rebase su frontera. No desea ser una empanadilla como Cheshire. Tiene todo lo que tiene Inglaterra, incluyendo treinta millas de Watling Street[24], e Inglaterra no puede mostrar nada más hermoso ni nada más feo que las obras de la naturaleza y las obras del hombre que se ven dentro de los límites del condado. Es Inglaterra en pequeño, perdida en medio de Inglaterra, olvidada por los buscadores de lo extremo; acaso de vez en cuando se duele algo de ese abandono, pero ¡cuán orgullosa en el conocimiento instintivo de sus rasgos y trazos representativos!

Constanza y Sofía, entregadas a las profundas preocupaciones de la juventud, no se cuidaban de tales asuntos. Vivían rodeadas del paisaje. A cada lado, los campos y brezales de Staffordshire, cruzados por caminos y carreteras, ferrocarriles, ríos y líneas de telégrafo, delimitados por setos, ornados y dotados de respetabilidad por casas solariegas y elegantes parques, animados por pueblos en las intersecciones y cálidamente contemplados por el sol, se extendían ondulantes. Y por las curvas de los profundos cortes se precipitaban trenes, y por los amarillos caminos trotaban y resonaban carros y carromatos, y sobre la superficie de los imperturbables canales pasaban largas y estrechas barcas con lentitud majestuosa e infinita; los ríos sólo tenían que sostenerse a sí mismos, pues los de Staffordshire han permanecido hasta el día de hoy vírgenes de quillas. Sería posible imaginar los mensajes acerca de precios, muertes repentinas y caballos en su vuelo por los cables bajo las patas de los pájaros. En las posadas los utopistas llamaban al orden al universo delante de sus cervezas; en las casas solariegas y los parques se conservaba la dignidad de Inglaterra como es debido. Las aldeas estaban llenas de mujeres que no hacían otra cosa que luchar contra el hambre y la inmundicia y reparar los efectos del desgaste de la ropa. En los campos había miles de labriegos, pero los campos eran tan extensos y numerosos que esta dispersa multitud se perdía totalmente dentro de ellos. El cuco era mucho más perceptible que el hombre; dominaba millas cuadradas enteras con su canto sonoro. Y en los ventosos brezales jugaban las alondras en los imborrables caminos de mulas utilizados durante siglos, aún antes de que los romanos pensaran en hacer Watling Street. En suma, la vida cotidiana del condado se desarrollaba con toda su inmensa variedad e importancia, pero Constanza y Sofía, aunque estaban en él, no formaban parte de él.

Lo cierto es que estando en el condado estaban también en la región; y nadie que viva en la región, aunque sea viejo y no tenga nada que hacer más que reflexionar sobre las cosas en general, piensa jamás en el condado. Por lo que atañe al condado, casi daría igual que la región estuviese en medio del Sahara. Hace caso omiso del condado, excepto para usarlo a veces, despreocupadamente, para estirar las piernas por la tarde, los días de fiesta, como un hombre puede usar su jardín trasero. No tiene nada en común con el condado; se basta generosamente a sí misma. No obstante, esa autosuficiencia y la verdadera sal de su vida sólo se pueden apreciar imaginándolas constreñidas por el condado. Se extiende ante él como una mancha insignificante, como una Pléyade oscura en un verdoso cielo vacío. Y Hanbridge tiene forma de caballo con su jinete, Bursley de medio asno, Knype de unos pantalones, Longshaw de pulpo y el pequeño Turnhill de escarabajo. Las Cinco Ciudades[25] parecen pegarse unas a otras buscando seguridad. Sin embargo, semejante idea las hace reír. Son únicas e indispensables. Desde el norte del condado hasta el sur, sólo ellas representan la civilización, la ciencia aplicada, la manufactura organizada y el siglo... hasta que llegamos a Wolwerhampton. Son únicas e indispensables porque no podemos tomar el té en una taza de té sin la ayuda de las Cinco Ciudades, porque no

podemos comer decentemente sin la ayuda de las Cinco Ciudades. Por eso la arquitectura de las Cinco Ciudades es una arquitectura de hornos y chimeneas; por eso su atmósfera es tan negra como su barro; por eso arde y humea toda la noche, de tal modo que se ha comparado a Longshaw con el infierno; por eso es desconocedora de los entresijos de la agricultura y no ha visto el trigo excepto en forma de paja de embalar y hogazas de kilo y medio; por eso, en otro orden de cosas, comprende los misteriosos hábitos del fuego y la tierra pura; por eso vive apiñado en calles resbaladizas donde el ama de casa tiene que cambiar los visillos de las ventanas al menos cada quince días si quiere seguir siendo respetable; por eso se levanta en masa a las seis de la mañana en verano y en invierno y se va a dormir cuando cierran las tabernas; por eso existe: para que uno pueda tomar té en una taza de té y juguetear con una chuleta en un plato. Toda la loza cotidiana que se utiliza en el reino se hace en las Cinco Ciudades, y mucha más. Una región capaz de una manufactura tan gigantesca, de un monopolio tan completo —y que encuentra energía para producir también carbón, hierro y grandes hombres—, será tal vez una mancha insignificante en un condado, considerada geográficamente, pero sin duda tiene toda la justificación para tratar al condado como su jardín trasero de una vez a la semana y no hacerle ni caso el resto del tiempo.

Ni siquiera la majestuosa idea de que en todo momento y lugar en que, en toda Inglaterra, una mujer friega, lo que friega es el producto de la región; que en todo momento y lugar en que, en toda Inglaterra, se rompe un plato, la rotura significa más negocio para la región; ni siquiera esa majestuosa idea se les ha ocurrido jamás a ninguna de estas muchachas. Lo cierto es que estando en las Cinco Ciudades estaban también en la Plaza, en Bursley, y la Plaza prestaba tan poca atención a la manufactura principal como la región al condado. Bursley se lleva la palma de la antigüedad en las Cinco Ciudades. Ningún desarrollo industrial puede arrebatarle su superioridad en edad, que le hace sentirse absolutamente segura en su engreimiento. Y jamás llegará el momento en que las demás ciudades —por mucho que se hinchen y echen bravatas— dejen de pronunciar el nombre de Bursley como pronuncia uno el de su madre. Añadid a esto que la Plaza era el centro del comercio al por menor de Bursley (que despreciaba la producción principal como algo al por mayor, vulgar y sin duda inmundo) y comprenderéis la importancia y el voluntario aislamiento de la Plaza en el plan del universo creado. ¡Ahí la tenéis, incrustada en la región, y a la región incrustada en el condado, y al condado en el corazón de Inglaterra, perdido y soñando!

La Plaza llevaba el nombre de San Lucas. Al evangelista le habrían sorprendido quizá algunos fenómenos que tenían lugar en su plaza, pero, con excepción de la Semana de Vigilia, cuando siempre sucedía lo inesperado, la Plaza de San Lucas vivía de una manera aceptablemente santa, aunque en ella había cinco tabernas. Había cinco tabernas, un banco, una barbería, una confitería, tres tiendas de ultramarinos, dos farmacias, una ferretería, una casa de modas y cinco mercerías. Éste era el catálogo completo. La Plaza de San Lucas no tenía sitio para establecimientos menores. La aristocracia de la Plaza se componía indudablemente de los merceros (pues el banco era impersonal), y de los cinco la tienda de Baines era la más importante. No era posible que hubiese un establecimiento más respetado que el del señor Baines. Y aunque John Baines llevaba una docena de años confinado en su lecho, seguía viviendo en boca de admirados y ceremoniosos burgueses como «nuestro honorable conciudadano». Se merecía su fama.

La tienda de los Baines, para formar la cual se habían unido tres viviendas contiguas, se hallaba en el extremo de la Plaza. Formaba más o menos la tercera parte del lado sur de ella, estando ocupado el resto por Critchlow (una farmacia), la casa de modas y la Bodega Espíritu de Hanover. («Bodega» era un sinónimo favorito de «taberna» en la Plaza. Sólo dos de las tabernas eran tabernas ordinarias; el resto eran «bodegas»). Era un edificio compuesto y de tres pisos, de un ladrillo entre rojo y negruzco, con una fachada de tienda saliente y, sobre ésta y detrás de ella, dos filas de ventanitas. En el marco de cada ventana había un rollo de tela roja lleno de serrín para evitar corrientes; había sencillas persianas blancas bajadas unas seis pulgadas desde lo alto de cada ventana. No había cortinas en ninguna de éstas salvo en una; era la ventana del salón, que se hallaba en el primer piso y daba a la esquina de la Plaza con King Street. Otra ventana, en el segundo piso, era especial porque no tenía persiana ni almohadilla y estaba muy sucia; era la ventana de una habitación que no se usaba y a la que conducía una escalera independiente aislada por una puerta siempre cerrada con llave. Constanza y Sofía habían vivido en constante expectación de algo anormal que pudiera salir de aquella misteriosa habitación, contigua a la suya. Pero sufrieron una decepción. La habitación no contenía ningún secreto vergonzoso salvo la incompetencia del arquitecto que había convertido las tres casas en una; no era más que una habitación vacía inutilizable. El edificio tenía también una considerable fachada a King Street, donde, detrás de la tienda, estaba cobijada la sala, con una gran ventana y una puerta que conducía directamente a la calle por medio de dos escalones. Una extraña peculiaridad de la tienda era que no ostentaba rótulo alguno. En tiempos había tenido uno grande que un memorable vendaval se había llevado a la Plaza. El señor Baines había decidido no reemplazarlo. Siempre había desaprobado lo que él denominaba «bombo» y por esta razón jamás quería oír hablar de rebajas. El odio al «bombo» aumentó tanto en él que hasta llegó a considerar un rótulo como «bombo». Las personas no informadas que deseaban encontrar la tienda tenían que preguntar y enterarse. Para el señor Baines, volver a poner el rótulo habría supuesto aprobar, sí, participar en la locura moderna por la autopublicidad poco escrupulosa. Este modo del señor

Baines de abstenerse de esos lujos de rótulos era de un modo u otro aceptado por los miembros más reflexivos de la comunidad como una prueba de que los principios del señor Baines eran todavía más elevados de lo que creían.

Constanza y Sofía eran las hijas de este prodigio de la naturaleza humana. No tenía más vástagos.

II

Apretaron la nariz contra la ventana del entresuelo[26] y miraron hacia la plaza todo lo perpendicularmente que permitía la saliente fachada de la tienda. El entresuelo estaba encima de la mitad de la tienda dedicada a sombrerería de señora y seda. Sobre la mitad dedicada a lana y camisería estaban la sala y el dormitorio principal. Cuando, buscando productos de belleza, uno subía de la tienda por una escalera curva, la cabeza iba llegando al nivel de la gran estancia, con mostrador de caoba delante de la ventana y en un lado, linóleo amarillo en el suelo, numerosas cajas de cartón, un magnífico espejo articulado de cuerpo entero y dos sillas. Como el alféizar de la ventana era más bajo que el mostrador, había un hueco entre los vidrios y la parte de atrás de éste, hueco en el cual desaparecían continuamente importantes objetos como tijeras, lápices, tizas y flores artificiales: otra prueba de la incompetencia del arquitecto.

Las muchachas sólo podían apretar la nariz contra la ventana arrodillándose en el mostrador, y eso es lo que estaban haciendo. La nariz de Constanza era respingona, pero encantadora. Sofía tenía una fina nariz romana; era una hermosa muchacha, hermosa y buena moza al mismo tiempo. Las dos eran como caballos de carreras, vibrantes de vida delicada, sensible y exuberante; una prueba exquisita y encantadora de la circulación de la sangre; inocentes, astutas, picaras, gazmoñas, efusivas, ignorantes y milagrosamente sabias. Sus edades eran quince y dieciséis; es una época en la que, si somos francos, hemos de admitir que no tenemos nada que aprender: sencillamente lo hemos aprendido todo en los últimos seis meses.

—¡Por allí va! —exclamó Sofía.

Por la Plaza, procedente de la esquina de King Street, pasaba una mujer que llevaba un gorrito nuevo con cintas rosas y un vestido nuevo azul caído en los hombros y que se ensanchaba en una amplia circunferencia en el dobladillo. A pesar de la silenciosa y soleada soledad de la Plaza (pues era un jueves a primera hora de la tarde y todas las tiendas estaban cerradas excepto la confitería y una farmacia), aquel gorrito y aquel vestido flotaban hacia el norte en busca de algo novelesco, bajo la mirada despiadada de Constanza y Sofía. Dentro de ellos, en alguna parte, estaba el alma de Maggie, una sirvienta de la casa Baines. Maggie estaba en la tienda desde antes de la concepción de Constanza y Sofía. Pasaba diecisiete horas al día en una cocina y despensa subterráneas y las otras siete en un ático, sin salir nunca salvo para ir a la capilla el domingo por la tarde y, una vez al mes, el jueves después de comer. Le estaban estrictamente prohibidos los «acompañantes», pero en raras ocasiones se le permitía, como un enorme favor, que una tía de Longshaw la visitara en su guarida subterránea. Todo el mundo, incluida ella misma, consideraba que tenía una buena «casa» y era bien tratada. Era innegable, por ejemplo, que se le permitía enamorarse exactamente a su elección, siempre que no «tuviera enredos» en la cocina o el patio. Y lo cierto era que Maggie se había enamorado. En diecisiete años se había comprometido once veces. Nadie podía concebir cómo aquel organismo feo y vigoroso podía languidecer blandamente por la seducción hasta de un miembro de una cuadrilla de carboneros, ni por qué habiendo atrapado a un hombre en sus dulces redes podía ser tan estúpida como para dejarlo escapar. Sin embargo, hay misterios en el alma de las Maggies. Aquella sirvienta había estado comprometida quizá más veces que ninguna mujer de Bursley. Sus empleadores estaban tan acostumbrados a sus interesantes anuncios, que durante años se había formado el hábito de no decir en respuesta nada más que «¿De veras, Maggie?». Los compromisos y las trágicas rupturas eran el pasatiempo de Maggie. De haber estado en otra posición, lo mismo se habría puesto a estudiar piano.

—¡Sin guantes, claro! —criticó Sofía.

—Bueno, no puedes exigirle que lleve guantes —dijo Constanza.

Después, una pausa, mientras el sombrero y el vestido se aproximaban al extremo de la Plaza.

—¿Y si se vuelve y nos ve? —sugirió Constanza.

—A mí me da igual —dijo Sofía, con una altivez casi desapasionada; su cabeza tembló levemente.

Había, como de costumbre, varios haraganes en el extremo de la Plaza, en la esquina entre el banco y el «Marqués de Granby». Y uno de ellos se adelantó y estrechó la mano a una Maggie visiblemente bien dispuesta. Estaba claro que era una cita, abierta y sin reparos. ¡La virgen cuarentona, cuyo beso no habría fundido la manteca, había elegido a la duodécima víctima! La pareja desapareció por Oldcastle Street.

—¡Bien! —exclamó Constanza— ¿Has visto algo parecido en tu vida?

Y Sofía, a falta de palabras adecuadas, enrojeció y se mordió los labios.

Con la profunda e instintiva crueldad de la juventud, Constanza y Sofía se habían reunido expresamente en su lugar predilecto, el entresuelo, para mofarse de Maggie con su nuevo atavío. Abrigaban la vaga idea de que una mujer tan fea y sucia como Maggie no tenía derecho a poseer ropa nueva. Hasta su deseo de tomar el aire un jueves por la tarde les parecía antinatural y en cierto modo reprensible. ¿Por qué iba a querer moverse de su cocina? En cuanto a sus tiernos anhelos, decididamente les costaba reconocérselos a Maggie. Que Maggie diera rienda suelta a una casta pasión era más que grotesco; era ofensivo y malvado. ¡Pero no hay que dudar ni por un momento que eran unas muchachas amables, bondadosas, obedientes y encantadoras! Porque lo eran. No eran ángeles.

—¡Es demasiado ridículo! —dijo Sofía con severidad. Tenía a su favor juventud, belleza y categoría. Y para ella era en verdad ridículo.

—¡Pobre Maggie! —murmuró Constanza. Era estúpidamente buena, una completa fábrica de excusas para los demás; su benevolencia estaba eternamente invadiéndola y superando a su razón.

—¿A qué hora dijo mamá que volvería? —preguntó Sofía.

—Hasta la hora de cenar no.

—¡Oh! ¡Aleluya! —estalló Sofía, entrelazando las manos de gozo. Y las dos se deslizaron del mostrador como si fueran chicos y no, como decía su madre, «unas chicas mayores».

—Vamos a tocar las cuadrillas de Osborne —sugirió Sofía. (Las cuadrillas de Osborne eran una serie de danzas concebidas para ser tocadas en el piano del salón por cuatro manos adornadas con joyas).

—Ni se me ocurriría —dijo Constanza con un precoz gesto de seriedad. En aquel gesto y en su tono hubo algo que le dijo a Sofía: «Sofía, ¿cómo puedes ser tan ciega ante la gravedad de nuestra transitoria existencia como para pedirme que vaya a aporrear el piano contigo?». Sin embargo, un momento antes era como un chiquillo.

—¿Por qué no? —interrogó Sofía.

—No volveré a tener otra oportunidad como la de hoy para seguir con esto —dijo Constanza, cogiendo una bolsa del mostrador.

Se sentó y sacó de la bolsa un trozo de lienzo de trama ancha en el cual estaba bordando un ramo de rosas con lanas de colores. El lienzo estaba antes en un bastidor, pero, ahora que estaba hecha la labor delicada de los pétalos y las hojas y no faltaba más que el monótono fondo, Constanza se contentaba con sujetarse con alfileres la tela a la rodilla. Con la larga aguja y varias madejas de lana color mostaza, se inclinó sobre el lienzo y se puso a rellenar los diminutos cuadrados. Todo el dibujo se disponía en cuadrados —las gradaciones de rojos y verdes, las curvas de los capullos más pequeños—, todo estaba constreñido a los cuadrados, y el resultado imitaba un fragmento de rígida alfombra de Axminster. Con todo, la fina textura de la lana, la gracia regular y rápida de aquellos dedos que iban incesantemente detrás y delante del lienzo y el leve ruido de la lana al pasar por los agujeros, y la concentrada y juvenil seriedad de aquellos ojos bajos, disculpaban y prestaban encanto a una actividad que no era posible justificar por motivos artísticos. El lienzo estaba destinado a adornar una pantalla dorada de chimenea del salón y también a constituir el regalo de cumpleaños de su hija mayor para la señora Baines. Pero nadie sino la señora Baines podía saber si la empresa era tan secreta para ella misma como esperaba Constanza.

—Con —murmuró Sofía—, a veces das asco.

—Bueno —dijo Constanza con indiferencia—; no sirve de nada hacer como si no hubiera que acabar esto antes de que volvamos al colegio, porque hay que acabarlo.

Sofía se puso a dar vueltas por la habitación: una presa madura para el Maligno.

—¡Oh! —exclamó gozosamente, casi en éxtasis, atisbando detrás del espejo de cuerpo entero—. ¡Aquí está la falda nueva de mamá! ¡La señorita Duncan le ha puesto el ribete! ¡Oh, mamá, qué imponente vas a estar!

Constanza oyó un frufrú detrás del espejo.

—¿Qué estás haciendo, Sofía?

—Nada.

—¿No te estarás poniendo la falda, verdad?

—¿Por qué no?

—¡Te vas a enterar muy bien, te lo aseguro!

Sin defenderse más, Sofía salió de detrás del enorme espejo. Ya se había quitado una parte considerable de su propio vestido y en su rostro se veía el rubor de la culpa. Atravesó corriendo la habitación y examinó atentamente una gran estampa coloreada que había en la pared.

Aquel grabado representaba a quince hermanas, todas de la misma estatura y de figura igualmente delgada, todas de la misma edad, unos veinticinco años, y de la misma altiva y aburrida belleza. Que eran en verdad hermanas lo dejaba claro el parecido facial entre ellas; su porte indicaba que eran princesas, la descendencia de algún rey y alguna reina inverosímilmente prolíficos. Aquellas manos nunca habían trabajado, aquellos rasgos nunca habían descansado de la sonrisa de la corte. Las princesas se movían en un paisaje de peldaños de mármol y porches con un quiosco de música y extraños árboles en la distancia. Una iba vestida de amazona, otra en traje de tarde, otra vestida para el té, otra para el teatro; otra parecía preparada para irse a dormir. Una llevaba a una niña de la mano; no podía ser su hija, porque aquellas princesas estaban muy por encima de las pasiones humanas. ¿De dónde había sacado a la niña? ¿Por qué una hermana se iba al teatro, otra a tomar el té, otra el establo y otra a dormir? ¿Por qué una llevaba un grueso abrigo y otra se resguardaba de los rayos del sol con una sombrilla? La imagen estaba envuelta en el misterio; lo más raro era que todas aquellas altezas estaban al parecer contentas con sus atavíos, tan ridículos y pasados de moda. ¡Sombreros ridículos, con velos flotando por detrás; gorritos ridículos, pegados a la cabeza y con lunares; peinados ridículos casi colocados en el cogote; mangas ridículas, engorrosas; cinturas ridículas que llegaban casi a la altura del codo; chaquetas ridículas con festones! ¡Y las faldas! ¡Qué espectáculo eran aquellas faldas! No eran sino amplias pirámides adornadas; en la cima de cada una estaba pegada la mitad superior de una princesa. Era sorprendente que unas princesas consintieran en ir tan ridículas y tan incómodas. Pero Sofía no veía nada extraño en la estampa, que llevaba el letrero: «La última moda de París para verano. Suplemento gratuito de la *Revista de Myira».* Sofía nunca se había imaginado nada más elegante, encantador y gallardo que el atuendo de las quince princesas.

Pues Constanza y Sofía tenían la desventaja de vivir en la Edad Media. La crinolina no había alcanzado toda su circunferencia y quienes se ocupaban de mejorar la vestimenta ni siquiera habían pensado en ello. En todas las Cinco Ciudades no había un baño público, una biblioteca gratuita, un parque municipal ni un teléfono, ni siquiera un colegio interno. La gente no había comprendido la vital necesidad de ir a la playa todos los años. El obispo Colenso acababa de dejar estupefacta a la cristiandad con sus desvergonzadas ideas acerca del Pentateuco. Medio Lancashire se moría de hambre a causa de la guerra americana. El garrote vil era la principal diversión de las clases homicidas. Por increíble que pueda parecer, no había otro transporte más que un tranvía de mulas entre Bursley y Hanbridge, y sólo dos veces cada hora; y entre las demás ciudades no había transporte de ninguna clase. Uno se iba a Longshaw como si se fuera a Pekín. Era una época tan tenebrosa y atrasada que cabía preguntarse cómo podía dormir la gente por la noche en la cama pensando en su triste estado.

Felizmente, los habitantes de las Cinco Ciudades en aquella época estaban aceptablemente satisfechos consigo mismos y nunca hubieran siquiera sospechado que no eran totalmente modernos ni estaban totalmente despiertos. Pensaban que los movimientos intelectuales, industriales y sociales habían llegado todo lo lejos que podían llegar y se asombraban de su propio progreso. En vez de ser humildes y avergonzarse, se mostraban orgullosos de sus lamentables logros. Tendrían que haber mirado hacia delante, anhelando mansamente las prodigiosas hazañas de la posteridad, pero, como tenían demasiada poca fe y demasiado engreimiento, se conformaban con mirar hacia atrás y hacer comparaciones con el pasado. No preveían esta milagrosa generación nuestra. ¡Unos desdichados, ciegos y complacientes! Una cosa típica de ellos era el risible coche de caballos. El cochero hacía sonar una enorme campana cinco minutos antes de partir para que se oyera desde la capilla wesleyana hasta el patio de Cock; después, tras algunas deliberaciones y vacilaciones, el vehículo salía rodando sobre sus raíles dirigiéndose a ignotos peligros mientras los pasajeros gritaban sus

despedidas. En Bleakridge tenía que detenerse en la barrera de peaje; para subir las montañas de Levesaon Place y Sutherland Street (hacia Hanbridge) le ayudaba un tercer caballo, en cuyo lomo iba encaramado un rapaz diminuto haciendo restallar el látigo; aquel chico vivía como una lanzadera en la carretera entre Leveson Place y Sutherland Street e incluso cuando hacía mal tiempo era la envidia de todos los demás chicos. Tras media hora de peligroso tránsito, el coche enfilaba solemnemente una estrecha calle junto a la oficina de Señales de Hanbridge y el rubicundo cochero, después de dar muchas vueltas a la palanca de hierro pulido de su único freno, dirigía su atención a los pasajeros con aire serenamente triunfal; despidiéndolos con una especie de sentimiento de gloria insuficientemente reconocida.

¡Y esto se consideraba la última palabra en tracción! ¡Un rapaz restallando un látigo sobre un caballo extra! ¡Oh, ciegos, ciegos! No podíais prever los ciento veinte vagones eléctricos que ahora se precipitan como locos dando tumbos y causando estruendo a veinte millas por hora por todas las calles principales de la región.

Así que, naturalmente, Sofía, tocada de su orgullo por su época, no abrigaba duda alguna en lo tocante a la definitiva elegancia de las princesas. Las estudió como a quince apóstoles del no va más; después, sacando flores y plumas de una caja en medio de las advertencias de Constanza, se retiró detrás del espejo y al poco apareció como una gran dama ataviada al estilo de las princesas. La tremenda falda nueva de su madre se inflaba en torno a ella como un globo con toda su fantástica y costosa riqueza. Y junto con la falda se había puesto la importancia de su madre, ese porte de segura autoridad, de capacidad probada en muchas crisis, que caracterizaba a la señora Baines y que ésta parecía comunicar a sus vestidos aun antes de usarlos con regularidad. Pues era un hecho que las prendas vacías de la señora Baines inspiraban respeto, como si alguna esencia hubiera escapado de ella y permaneciera en aquéllas.

—¡Sofía!

Constanza dejó quieta la aguja y, sin alzar la cabeza, levantando los ojos de la labor, contempló la figura inmóvil y teatral de su hermana. Era un sacrilegio lo que estaba presenciando, una prodigiosa irreverencia. Era consciente de que un castigo caería de inmediato sobre aquella chiquilla atrevida e impía. Pero ella, que nunca sentía aquellos locos y sorprendentes impulsos, no pudo sin embargo dejar de sonreír débilmente.

—¡Sofía! —musitó con una alarma tan intensa que se mezclaba con una admiración aprobadora—. ¡Eres incorregible!

El lindo rostro sonrojado de Sofía coronaba la extraordinaria estructura como una flor, casi sin poder contener la risa. Era tan alta como su madre e igual de majestuosa, arrogante y orgullosa y, a pesar de la trenza, la infantil peineta semicircular y los sueltos miembros como de potranca, podía sostener tan bien como su madre la majestad del vestido ribeteado. Sus ojos brillaban con la expresión retadora de la virgen inexperimentada mientras se pavoneaba por la estancia. Una generosa vitalidad inspiraba sus movimientos. La confiada y feroz alegría de la juventud brillaba en su frente. «¿Qué hay en la Tierra que me iguale?», parecía preguntar con arrogancia encantadora y sin embargo implacable. Era hija de un respetado mercero confinado en un lecho, en una población insignificante, perdida en el laberinto del centro de Inglaterra, si queréis; no obstante, ¿qué clase de hombre, viéndose frente a ella, negaría o podría negar su ingenua pretensión de dominio? Allí estaba, con el miriñaque de su madre, para ser deseada por el mundo. ¡Y en la inocencia de su alma lo sabía! El corazón de una joven habla misteriosamente y le revela su poder mucho antes de que pueda utilizarlo. Si no puede encontrar otra cosa que domeñar, podéis sorprenderla en su edad temprana domeñando un poste o recibiendo pleitesía de una silla vacía. La víctima experimental de Sofía fue Constanza, con la aguja en el aire y la blanda mirada de sus ojos bajos.

Entonces Sofía se cayó andando hacia atrás; la pirámide perdió el equilibrio; grandes anillos de seda extendidos temblaron y oscilaron en el suelo, gigantescos, y los pequeños pies de Sofía se quedaron como los de una muñeca en el borde del círculo mayor, que se curvaba y arqueaba sobre ellos como la boca de una cueva. La brusca transición de sus rasgos de un confiado orgullo a una ridícula sorpresa y alarma fue lo bastante cómica como para haber provocado una risa alocada y nada caritativa en cualquier ser menos humano que Constanza. Pero ésta corrió hacia ella como la personificación del instinto de benevolencia y trató de levantarla.

—¡Oh, Sofía! —exclamó en tono compasivo; su voz no parecía conocer ningún tono de reprensión—. Espero que no lo hayas estropeado, porque mamá se pondría...

Sus palabras fueron interrumpidas por unos gemidos procedentes de la puerta que daba acceso a los dormitorios. Dichos gemidos, que indicaban acerbísimo tormento físico, se hicieron más intensos. Las muchachas miraron fijamente la puerta, sorprendidas y asustadas, Sofía levantando su morena cabeza y

Constanza con los brazos alrededor de la cintura de Sofía. La puerta se abrió, dejando entrar nuevos gemidos muy amplificados y dando paso a un hombre joven y de pequeña estatura que se agarraba frenéticamente la cabeza y contorsionaba todos los músculos de la cara. Al ver el escultórico grupo de las dos muchachas enlazadas y tendidas boca abajo, una envuelta en una crinolina y la otra con un ramillete de ovillos de lana prendido a la rodilla, retrocedió de un salto, dejó de gemir, compuso el rostro y puso todo su empeño en hacer como si no fuera él el que estaba expresando ruidosamente su padecimiento, como si en realidad estuviera atravesando la estancia cual transeúnte casual de camino a la tienda. Se sonrojó intensamente; las muchachas también se sonrojaron.

—¡Oh, les ruego me disculpen, por favor! —dijo de repente el joven, y dándose la vuelta con celeridad desapareció por donde había venido.

Era el señor Povey, persona universalmente apreciada tanto dentro como fuera de la tienda, el delegado del señor Baines en su confinamiento, el consuelo y sostén inquebrantable del señor Baines, el radiante centro de orden y disciplina de la tienda; un joven tranquilo, tímido, reservado, aburrido y obstinado, absolutamente leal, absolutamente eficiente en su esfera; sin brillo, sin distinción; tal vez de mentalidad pequeña, sin duda de mentalidad estrecha, pero ¡qué fuerza en la tienda! La tienda era inconcebible sin el señor Povey. Tenía menos de veinte años y no había concluido su aprendizaje cuando el señor Baines sufrió el ataque, y al momento había dado muestra de lo que valía. De los ayudantes era el único que dormía en la casa. Su dormitorio era contiguo al de su principal; había una puerta entre las dos cámaras y dos peldaños que bajaban del más grande al más pequeño.

Las muchachas se pusieron en pie, Sofía con la ayuda de Constanza. No era fácil enderezar una crinolina vuelta del revés. Las dos empezaron a reír nerviosamente, con un toque de histeria.

—Creo que debería ir al dentista —susurró Constanza.

El dolor de muelas del señor Povey llevaba dos días siendo motivo de preocupación en aquel microcosmos; en la comida había quedado claro que el jueves por la mañana el señor Povey iría a ver a los hermanos Oulsnam, los dentistas de Hillport, sin más dilación. Sólo los jueves y los domingos comía el señor Povey con la familia. Los demás días lo hacía más tarde; solo, pero en la mesa familiar, cuando la señora Baines o uno de los ayudantes podía «relevarlo» en la tienda. Antes de irse a visitar a su hermana mayor, que vivía en Axe, la señora Baines insistió al señor Povey en que llevaba veinticuatro horas sin comer más que «bazofia» y que si no tenía cuidado se haría cargo de él. Él había contestado, en su tono más tranquilo, sagaz y práctico —el tono que se granjeaba el respeto de todo el que lo oía—, que sólo estaba esperando al jueves por la tarde para ir de inmediato a la consulta de los Oulsnam y ocuparse del asunto como es debido. Incluso había añadido que las personas que aplazaban el ir al dentista no hacían más que buscarse problemas para el futuro.

Nadie podría haber sospechado que el señor Povey tuviera miedo de ir al dentista. Pero eso era lo que ocurría. No se atrevía a ponerse en marcha. Él, el parangón del sentido común, a quien la mayoría de la gente se representaba de un modo u otro como exento de las fragilidades humanas, no era capaz sin embargo de armarse de valor para llamar a la puerta de un dentista.

—¡Qué aspecto tan gracioso tenía! —exclamó Sofía—. Me pregunto qué pensó. ¡A mí se me escapó la risa!

Constanza no dijo nada, pero cuando Sofía se hubo vuelto a poner su ropa asegurándose de que el vestido nuevo no hubiera salido mal parado, y Constanza estaba de nuevo cosiendo tranquilamente, dijo, deteniendo la aguja como cuando se interrumpió para mirar a Sofía:

—Estaba pensando si no habría que hacer algo por el señor Povey.

—¿El qué? —preguntó Sofía.

—¿Ha vuelto a su habitación?

—Vamos a escuchar —dijo Sofía, la aventurera.

Salieron de la sala, dejaron atrás la escalera que conducía al segundo piso y recorrieron el largo pasillo, interrumpido en su mitad por dos peldaños y cubierto por una estrecha alfombra ribeteada cuyas líneas paralelas lo hacían parecer más largo. Iban de puntillas, muy pegadas la una a la otra. La puerta del señor Povey estaba entreabierta. Escucharon; ni un ruido.

—¡Señor Povey! —exclamó Constanza con una tosecilla discreta.

No hubo respuesta. Fue Sofía la que empujó la puerta y la abrió. Constanza hizo un remilgado ademán de tirar del desnudo brazo de Sofía, pero la siguió cautelosamente dentro de la habitación prohibida, que sin embargo estaba vacía. La cama estaba deshecha y sobre ella había un libro, *La cosecha de una mirada serena.*

—¡La cosecha de una muela serena! —susurró Sofía entre risitas sofocadas.

—¡Sssh! —siseó Constanza.

De la habitación contigua llegaba un sonido regular, amortiguado, oratorio, como si alguien hubiera empezado muchos años antes a pronunciar un discurso y se hubiera olvidado de concluir y jamás fuera a concluir. Conocían aquel sonido y salieron de la habitación del señor Povey temiendo perturbarlo. En aquel momento reapareció el señor Povey, esta vez en la puerta del salón, al otro extremo del largo corredor. Parecía estar huyendo sin resultado de su muela como un asesino trata de huir de su conciencia.

—¡Oh, señor Povey! —dijo rápidamente Constanza, pues las había sorprendido saliendo de su dormitorio—. Precisamente le estábamos buscando.

—Para ver si podíamos hacer algo por usted —añadió Sofía.

—¡Oh, no, gracias! —dijo el señor Povey.

Luego empezó a dirigirse despacio pasillo adelante.

—No ha ido al dentista —dijo Constanza en tono compasivo.

—No, no he ido —dijo el señor Povey como si Constanza estuviese indicando un hecho que hubiese escapado a su atención—. La verdad es que me pareció que iba a llover, y si me mojara, ya ve...

¡Pobre señor Povey!

—Sí —respondió Constanza—; por supuesto tiene que guardarse de las corrientes. ¿No le parece que estaría bien que viniese a sentarse en la sala? Está encendida la chimenea.

—Estoy bien, gracias —dijo el señor Povey. Y tras una pausa—: Bueno, gracias, iré.

III

Las muchachas dejaron que pasara delante de ellas en lo alto de la retorcida escalera que bajaba a la sala. Constanza le seguía y Sofía seguía a Constanza.

—Siéntese en la mecedora de papá —ofreció Constanza.

Había dos mecedoras de respaldo estriado protegido por un tapete. La de la izquierda seguía ostentando el título de «la mecedora de papá» aunque su propietario no se había sentado en ella desde mucho antes de la guerra de Crimea y nunca volvería a hacerlo.

—Creo que mejor en la otra —dijo el señor Povey—, porque es en el lado derecho, ¿ve? —Y se tocó la mejilla derecha.

Ocupó la mecedora de la señora Baines e inclinó la cara hacia la chimenea, buscando alivio en el calor. Sofía metió el atizador en el fuego, por lo que el señor Povey apartó bruscamente la cara. Luego sintió una cosa ligera en los hombros. Constanza había quitado el tapete del respaldo y lo protegía de las corrientes con él. No se rebeló inmediatamente y por tanto quedó excluido de la rebelión. Quedó atrapado por el tapete, que lo constituyó formalmente en un inválido y a Constanza y Sofía en sus enfermeras. Constanza corrió la cortina de la puerta de la calle. Por la ventana no podía entrar corriente alguna, pues tal ventana no estaba «hecha para abrirse». La era de la ventilación no había llegado. Sofía cerró las otras dos puertas. Y las muchachas, cada una cerca de una puerta, contemplaron al señor Povey desde detrás de su espalda, indecisas pero llenas de un delicioso sentido de responsabilidad.

La situación adquiría ahora tintes diferentes. La gravedad del dolor de muelas del señor Povey, que

hacía cada vez más manifiesta, había borrado el recuerdo del ridículo encuentro en el entresuelo. Viendo a aquellas dos muchachas, con sus vestidos negros de manga corta y sus delantales negros, sus suaves cabellos y sus caras serias y tranquilas, cualquiera las habría juzgado incapaces de apartarse ni lo más mínimo de una formalidad de arcángeles; especialmente Sofía, que ofrecía una maravillosa imitación de santa inocencia. En cuanto al dolor de muelas, su acción sobre el señor Povey era al parecer periódica; iba creciendo hasta la crisis, como una ola, aumentando la tortura hasta que la ola se rompía y dejaba al señor Povey extenuado pero libre del dolor por un momento. Estas crisis se repetían más o menos cada minuto. Y ahora, acostumbrado a la presencia de las doncellas y habiendo admitido tácitamente, mediante su aceptación del tapete, que su estado era anormal, se entregó con franqueza a la aflicción. No ocultó en absoluto su agonía, totalmente exhibida por repentinas contorsiones de su anatomía y frenéticas oscilaciones de su mecedora. Luego, mientras se recostaba en el respaldo tras el paso de la última ola, debilitado, murmuró con voz de enfermo:

—No tendrán ustedes láudano, ¿verdad?

Las muchachas se animaron repentinamente.

—¿Láudano, señor Povey?

—Sí, para enjuagarme la boca.

Se incorporó, tenso; se estaba formando otra ola. El excelente individuo había perdido todo respeto a sí mismo, todo decoro.

—Seguro que hay en el aparador de mamá —dijo Sofía.

Constanza, que llevaba en el cinturón las llaves de la señora Baines —una solemne responsabilidad—, se acercó un poco temerosamente a un aparador de esquina, que ocupaba un ángulo a la derecha de la saliente chimenea, por encima un estante sobre el cual había un gran samovar de cobre. Aquel aparador, de ébano con incrustaciones de arce y caoba formando un sencillo dibujo a modo de cenefa, era típico de la habitación. Hacía juego con el papel de la pared en relieve, de color verde oscuro; el samovar de cobre, las mecedoras con sus tapetes y el armonio de palisandro, con una caja de té china de papel maché encima; hasta con la alfombra, sin duda la alfombra más curiosa que jamás se ha visto en una sala, hecha de tiras de alfombra de escalera cosidas. Aquel aparador había prestado ya muchos servicios; había contenido las medicinas de varias generaciones. Brillaba oscuramente con el grave y genuino lustre que sólo da el uso de mucho tiempo. La llave que Constanza eligió de su manojo era como el aparador, lisa y brillante por el paso de los años; entraba y giraba con gran facilidad, pero con un firme chasquido. La puerta se abrió reposadamente, como la puerta de una casa.

Las muchachas examinaron el sagrado interior, que tenía aspecto de estar habitado por un ejercito de diminutos prisioneros, cada uno gritando con toda la fuerza de su etiqueta para que se le enviase a una misión.

—¡Aquí está! —exclamó Sofía.

Y allí estaba: un frasco azul con etiqueta de color azafrán: «Precaución. VENENO. Láudano. Charles Critchlow, M.P.S., Farmacéutico. Plaza de San Lucas, Bursley».

Aquellas grandes mayúsculas atemorizaron a las jóvenes. Constanza cogió el frasco como habría podido coger un revólver cargado y miró a Sofía. No estaba su omnipotente y omnisciente madre para decirles lo que tenían que hacer. Ahora tenían que decidir ellas, que nunca habían decidido. Y Constanza era la mayor. Aquel líquido aterrador, cuyo nombre mismo daba miedo, ¿debía ser introducido en la boca del señor Povey a pesar de la advertencia impresa? La responsabilidad era tremenda.

—Quizá sería mejor preguntar al señor Critchlow —balbució Constanza.

La expectativa del láudano benefactor había animado al señor Povey, incluso le había medio curado el dolor de muelas por una especie de sugestión.

—¡Oh, no! —dijo—. No hace falta preguntar al señor Critchlow... Dos o tres gotas en un poco de agua —. Mostró impaciencia por darle al láudano.

Las muchachas sabían que existía una cierta antipatía entre el farmacéutico y el señor Povey.

—Seguro que no pasa nada —dijo Sofía—. Voy a traer el agua.

Con gritos juveniles y expresiones de alarma consiguieron verter cuatro mortales gotas oscuras (una más de las que quería Constanza) en una copa con un poco de agua. Y cuando tendieron la copa al señor Povey sus rostros eran los de unas cómicas y aterradas conspiradoras. Se sentían muy mayores y eran muy jóvenes.

El señor Povey bebió ansiosamente la poción, dejó la copa en la repisa de la chimenea e inclinó la cabeza a la derecha para sumergir la muela afectada. Permaneció en esta postura esperando la dulce influencia del remedio. Las muchachas se apartaron modestamente, pues el señor Povey no debía tragar la medicina y preferían dejarle resolver sin estorbos el delicado problema. Cuando volvieron a examinarlo estaba recostado en la mecedora con la boca abierta y los ojos cerrados.

—¿Le ha aliviado, señor Povey?

—Creo que voy a echarme un minuto en el sofá —fue la extraña contestación del señor Povey; acto seguido se puso en pie como movido por un resorte y se dejó caer en el sofá de crin que estaba entre la chimenea y la ventana, y allí se quedó tumbado, despojado de toda su dignidad, un simple animal apaleado con traje gris de faldones muy peculiares, chaleco muy arrugado, una insignia en la solapa y cuello y puños de papel bien ajustados.

Constanza corrió tras él con el tapete y se lo extendió sobre los hombros con suavidad; Sofía le puso otro sobre las delgadas piernecillas, que tenía encogidas.

Después contemplaron su obra acusándose a sí mismas en secreto y con un espantoso recelo.

—¡No se lo habrá tragado! —susurró Constanza.

—De todos modos se ha dormido —dijo Sofía en voz más alta.

El señor Povey, efectivamente, se había dormido; tenía la boca muy abierta, como la puerta de una tienda. La cuestión era si su sueño no era el sueño eterno; la cuestión era si no había terminado de sufrir para siempre.

Entonces se puso a roncar de una forma horrible; sus ronquidos parecían un desastre portentoso.

Sofía se aproximó como quien se acerca a una bomba y, envalentonándose, miró dentro de su boca.

—¡Oh, Con! —llamó a su hermana—¡Ven a ver! ¡Qué curioso!

En un instante los cuatro ojos exploraban el singular paisaje de la boca del señor Povey. En una esquina, a la derecha de aquel interior, había solo un fragmento de muela, unida al señor Povey por delgadísimo lazo, de modo que cada vez que el señor Povey respiraba, al tiempo que su pecho se elevaba ligeramente y el vendaval gemía en la caverna, aquella muela se movía por su cuenta, mostrando que su antigua relación con el señor Povey estaba próxima a su fin.

—Ésa es —dijo Sofía, señalándola—, Y está casi suelta. ¿Has visto en tu vida una cosa más graciosa?

La extremada gracia de la cosa había desvanecido en Sofía el temor por la muerte repentina del señor Povey.

—Voy a ver cuánto ha tomado —dijo Constanza preocupada, acercándose a la chimenea.

—Pues yo creo... —empezó Sofía, y luego se detuvo, mirando la máquina de coser, que estaba junto al sofá.

Era una máquina de marca Howe. Tenía un cajoncito, y dentro de él había unas pequeñas pinzas. Constanza, ocupada en oler los restos de la poción para hacerse idea de si era mortífera, oyó el familiar crujido del cajón y después vio a Sofía acercándose a la boca del señor Povey con las pinzas.

—¡Sofía, por amor de Dios! ¿Qué estás haciendo?

—Nada —dijo Sofía.

Al momento el señor Povey salió de golpe de su sueño de láudano.

—¡Da brincos! —murmuró; y tras una pausa reflexiva—: Pero va mucho mejor. —Sea como fuere, había escapado a la muerte.

Sofía tenía la mano derecha escondida detrás de la espalda.

En aquel preciso instante pasó un vendedor ambulante por King Street pregonando mejillones y berberechos.

—¡Oh! —casi chilló Sofía—¡Vamos a comprar mejillones y berberechos para el té! Y se abalanzó a la ventana y la abrió, sin considerar lo peligrosas que eran las corrientes para el señor Povey.

En aquellos tiempos la gente dependía muchas veces de los caprichos de los vendedores ambulantes en cuanto a lo que daba sabor a su té, pero era una época venturosa en la que los caballeros andantes del comercio eran numerosos y emprendedores. Uno salía a la puerta de casa, cogía la comida al paso, se la llevaba, la cocinaba y se la comía, muy al estilo de los habitantes primitivos de Britania.

Constanza se vio obligada a reunirse con su hermana en el último escalón. Sofía bajó al penúltimo.

—¡Mejillones frescos y berberechos vivos! —vociferaba el vendedor ambulante, mirando al otro lado de la calle en la brisa abrileña. Era el célebre Hollins, un beodo profesional irlandés, con muchos años de iniquidad a sus espaldas; saludaba a los magistrados en la calle y se refería al asilo, que visitaba de vez en cuando, como «la Bastilla».

Sofía temblaba de pies a cabeza.

—¿De qué te ríes, estúpida? —le preguntó Constanza.

Sofía le enseñó disimuladamente las pinzas, que tenía medio guardadas en el bolsillo. Entre sus puntas había un fragmento muy perceptible, e incluso reconocible, del señor Povey.

Era la coronación de la carrera de Sofía como perpetradora de lo inenarrable.

—¡Cómo! —el rostro de Constanza dejó ver las contorsiones finales de una horrorizada incredulidad que se ve obligada a creer.

Sofía le dio un fuerte codazo para recordarle que estaban en la calle y además muy cerca del señor Povey.

—Y bien, queridas señoritas —dijo el vil Hollins—. Tres peniques la pinta, ¿y cómo está hoy su señora madre? ¡Sí, frescos, Dios me asista!

Capítulo II

LA MUELA

I

Las dos muchachas subieron la oscura escalera de piedra que conducía desde la cueva de Maggie hasta la puerta de la sala. Sofía, que iba delante, portaba una gran bandeja y Constanza otra pequeña. Constanza, que sólo llevaba en su bandeja una tetera, un cuenco de mejillones y berberechos humeantes y olorosos y un plato de pan tostado con mantequilla, entró directamente en la sala, a su derecha. Sofía cargaba con todos los materiales y el aparato de una merienda cena para dos, incluyendo huevos, jamón y pan tostado (cubierto por el recipiente para echar los posos del té, boca abajo), pero sin mejillones ni berberechos. Giró a la derecha, recorrió el pasillo por el taller de corte, subió dos peldaños, entrando en la penumbra de la tienda cerrada, con los postigos echados y sábanas cubriéndolo todo, subió la escalera del entresuelo, atravesó éste y de allí pasó al corredor de los dormitorios. La experiencia había demostrado que era más sencillo dar este largo rodeo que pasar por la difícil esquina de la escalera de la sala cuando se llevaba una gran bandeja llena. Sofía llamó con el borde de la bandeja a la puerta del dormitorio principal. Cesó el amortiguado sonido oratorio que procedía del interior y abrió la puerta un hombre muy alto, muy delgado y con barba negra, que miró a Sofía como preguntando qué se proponía interrumpiendo de aquella manera.

—Les traigo el té, señor Critchlow —dijo Sofía.

Y el señor Critchlow tomó cuidadosamente la bandeja.

—¿Es mi pequeña Sofía? —preguntó una voz débil desde las profundidades de la habitación.

—Sí, padre —respondió Sofía.

Pero no intentó entrar en la habitación. El señor Critchlow dejó la bandeja en una cómoda cubierta con una tela blanca, cerca de la puerta, y cerró ésta sin ceremonia. El señor Critchlow era el amigo más antiguo e íntimo del señor Baines, aunque bastante más joven que el mercero. A menudo «se dejaba caer» para tener una charla con el inválido, pero la tarde del jueves era su tarde especial, que había consagrado al servicio del enfermo. Desde las dos en punto hasta las ocho en punto se hacía cargo de John Baines y reinaba autocráticamente en su habitación. Se sabía que no toleraba invasiones, ni siquiera visitas de embajador. ¡No! Dedicaba este tiempo semanal al negocio de la amistad y había que dejarle dirigir dicho negocio a su manera. Hasta la señora Baines evitaba perturbar las atenciones del señor Critchlow a su esposo. Le alegraba hacerlo, pues no se podía dejar solo al señor Baines en ninguna circunstancia, y la conveniencia de poder confiar en la presencia de un formal miembro de la Sociedad Farmacéutica seis horas de un determinado día cada semana superaba con mucho la pequeña afrenta a sus prerrogativas de esposa y ama de casa. El señor Critchlow era un hombre muy peculiar, pero cuando estaba en la habitación ella podía salir de casa tranquila. Además, John Baines disfrutaba mucho de aquellas tardes de los jueves. Para él no había «nadie como el señor Critchlow». Los dos viejas amigas experimentaban una especie de adusta y seca felicidad, encerrados en el cuarto, a salvo de mujeres y de necios en general. Cómo pasaban el tiempo era algo que no se sabía con certeza, pero la impresión era que hablaban de política. Sin duda, el señor Critchlow era un hombre muy peculiar. Era un hombre de costumbres. Con el té siempre tenía que tomar lo mismo. Mermelada de grosella negra, por ejemplo (la denominaba «conserva»). La idea de ofrecer al señor Critchlow un té que no comprendiera mermelada de grosella negra era inconcebible para la inteligencia de la Plaza de San Lucas. Así, en la época de las conservas de fruta, cuando toda la casa y toda la tienda se llenaban del apetitoso olor de la fruta cociéndose en azúcar, la señora Baines hacía llenar un número adicional de frascos de mermelada de grosella, «porque otra el señor Crichtlow ni la tocaría».

De modo que Sofía, al verse ante la puerta cerrada del dormitorio, bajó a la sala por el camino más corto. Sabía que cuando volviera a subir, después del té, encontraría la devastada bandeja en la alfombrilla de la habitación.

Constanza estaba sirviendo mejillones y berberechos al señor Povey. Éste llevaba puesto todavía uno de los tapetes. Sin duda se había adherido a sus hombros cuando se levantó del sofá de un salto, pues los tapetes de lana son unos objetos notoriamente parasitarios. Sofía se sentó con cierta timidez. También la seria

Constanza estaba turbada. El señor Povey no acostumbraba a tomar el té en la casa los jueves por la tarde, siendo su hábito el de salir al inmenso y misterioso mundo. Era la primera vez que compartía una comida con las muchachas a solas. La situación era indudablemente inesperada, imprevista; era también picante, y contribuía a ello el hecho de que Constanza y Sofía eran en cierto modo responsables del señor Povey. Se sentían responsables de él. Le habían brindado la simpatía práctica de dos jóvenes inteligentes y bien adiestradas, enfermeras innatas por razón de su sexo, y el señor Povey la había aceptado; ahora estaba en sus manos. La artera y monstruosa operación practicada por Sofía en la boca del señor Povey no les causaba mucha alarma a ninguna de las dos, y al parecer Constanza se había recuperado de la conmoción que le produjo al principio. Lo habían discutido en la cocina mientras preparaban el té; el tono condenatorio de Constanza, extraordinariamente severo y dictatorial, había producido cierto acaloramiento. Pero el éxito de la insolente moza la justificaba a pesar de todo argumento irrefutable en contrario. El señor Povey ya estaba mejor y era evidente que seguía ignorando su pérdida.

—¿Quieres? —preguntó Constanza a Sofía con el cucharón en el aire, encima del cuenco de moluscos.

—Sí, por favor —dijo Sofía con decisión.

Constanza sabía perfectamente que quería y sólo se lo había preguntado por puro nerviosismo.

—Pásame el plato, pues.

Cuando todos tuvieron mejillones, berberechos, té y pan tostado y hubieron convencido al señor Povey de que le quitara la corteza a su pan, y Constanza, sin ninguna necesidad, hubo prevenido a Sofía acerca de la mortal sustancia verde de los mejillones, y Constanza hubo indicado que las tardes se iban alargando y el señor Povey hubo manifestado su acuerdo en que así era, no quedaba nada que decir. Sobre todos ellos cayó un irritante silencio y nadie pudo levantarlo. Los ligeros ruidos de las conchas y la vajilla sonaban con la terrible claridad de los ruidos que se oyen por la noche. Cada uno evitaba la mirada de los demás. Constanza y Sofía estaban continuamente enderezando el cuerpo y expandiendo el tórax, y después miraban el plato; de vez en cuando se oía una tosecilla remilgada. Era un triste ejemplo de la diferencia entre los sueños de brillo social que abrigan las jóvenes y la realidad de la vida. Aquellas muchachas se volvían cada vez más infantiles hasta que, tras verse convertidas en mujeres por la administración del láudano, retrocedían a los ocho años —unas chiquillas— en la mesa del té.

Alivió la tensión el señor Povey.

—¡Dios mío! —musitó, movido por un descubrimiento sorprendente a este impío y desdichado juramento (¡él, ejemplar y modélico... y encima en presencia de unas inocentes muchachas!)—. ¡Me la he tragado!

—¿Que se ha tragado qué, señor Povey? —inquirió Constanza.

La punta de la lengua del señor Povey hizo un concienzudo viaje de inspección por todo el lado derecho de su boca.

—¡Oh, sí! —exclamó, como si aceptase solemnemente lo inevitable—, ¡Me la he tragado!

La cara de Sofía adquirió una tonalidad escarlata; parecía estar buscando un sitio para esconderla. A Constanza no se le ocurría nada que decir.

—Esa muela llevaba dos años suelta —explicó el señor Povey— y ahora me la he tragado con un mejillón.

—¡Oh, señor Povey! —exclamó Constanza confusa, y añadió—: Eso está bien; ahora ya no podrá dolerle más.

—¡Oh! —exclamó el señor Povey—, No era esa muela la que me dolía. Es un viejo trozo de atrás el que me ha martirizado estos días. Ojalá hubiera sido ésa.

Sofía acercó la taza a su roja cara. Al oír aquellas palabras del señor Povey sus mejillas se hincharon como si estuvieran llenas de gordas manzanas. Dejó de un golpe la taza en el plato, derramando el té, y luego salió corriendo de la habitación entre ahogados resoplidos.

—¡Sofía! —protestó Constanza.

—¡Es que... ! —masculló incoherentemente Sofía en la puerta—. No pasa nada. No...

Constanza, que se había levantado, se volvió a sentar.

II

Sofía huyó por el pasillo que llevaba a la tienda y se refugió en el taller de cortar, un cuarto que el sorprendente arquitecto había ideado en lo que habría sido el patio trasero de una de las tres casas originarias. La luz le venía del tejado; sólo un tabique de madera de ocho pies de altura lo separaba del pasillo. Allí Sofía dio rienda suelta a sus sentimientos; rió y lloró al mismo tiempo, empapando de abundantes lágrimas su pañuelo y soltando risitas nerviosas en una histeria que no podía dominar. El espectáculo del señor Povey lamentándose por una muela que creía haberse tragado, pero que en realidad tenía ella en su bolsillo mientras tanto, le parecía como para morirse de risa y lo más ridículo que había sucedido o podía suceder jamás en la Tierra. No podía más. Y cuando se imaginaba que ya estaba agotada y que había superado la extrema sensación de ridículo que le producía, dicha sensación se apoderaba de nuevo de ella y la enviaba otra vez a un abismo de locas carcajadas.

Poco a poco se fue tranquilizando. Oyó que se abría la puerta de la sala y que Constanza bajaba los escalones de la cocina con la bandeja del servicio del té. ¡El té, pues, había terminado sin ella! Constanza no se quedó en la cocina, porque las tazas y platos se dejaban para que los fregara Maggie como adecuada coda para el día mensual de asueto de ésta. La puerta de la sala se cerró. Y la visión del señor Povey con su tapete provocó en Sofía otra convulsión de risa y llanto. En aquel momento la puerta de la sala se volvió a abrir y Sofía hizo esfuerzos por guardar silencio mientras Constanza recorría apresuradamente el pasillo. Al cabo de un minuto regresó con su labor de lana, que había recogido del entresuelo, y la sala la acogió. ¡No tenía Constanza menos curiosidad por saber qué había sido de Sofía!

Al fin Sofía, con una débil sonrisa meditativa como único rastro de la tempestad que había tenido lugar en ella, subió lentamente al entresuelo por la tienda. ¡Allí no había nada interesante! Desde allí se dirigió hacia el salón y encontró la bandeja del señor Critchlow en la alfombrilla. La recogió y la bajó, pasando por el entresuelo y la tienda a la cocina, donde se puso a mordisquear distraídamente dos tostadas que se habían enfriado adquiriendo la consistencia del cuero. Subió los peldaños de piedra y escuchó junto a la puerta de la sala. ¡No se oía nada! Aquel encierro del señor Povey y Constanza era verdaderamente muy raro. Dio la vuelta a la casa, descendió sigilosamente la escalera retorcida y aplicó el oído con atención a la otra puerta de la sala. Captó un tenue ronquido regular. ¡El señor Povey, víctima del láudano y los mejillones, estaba durmiendo mientras Constanza trabajaba en su pantalla de chimenea! ¡Ahora sí que resultaba raro el encierro del señor Povey y Constanza, más que cualquier cosa que Sofía hubiese experimentado! Quería entrar en la sala, pero no se decidió a hacerlo. Se marchó con igual sigilo, desamparada y desconcertada, y a continuación se halló en el dormitorio que compartía con Constanza en lo alto de la casa; en la penumbra, se tendió en la cama y empezó a leer *La vida de Bruce,* pero leía sólo con los ojos.

Luego oyó movimiento en la escalera y el familiar crujido quejumbroso de la puerta al pie de aquélla. Se deslizó velozmente hasta la del dormitorio.

—Buenas noches, señor Povey. Espero que haya podido dormir.

¡La voz de Constanza!

—Es probable que me vuelva otra vez.

¡La voz del señor Povey, pesimista!

Después, un ruido de puertas que se cerraban. Casi había anochecido. Volvió a la cama, esperando la visita de Constanza. Pero un reloj dio las ocho y todos los diversos fenómenos relacionados con la partida del señor Critchlow sucedieron uno tras otro. Al mismo tiempo regresó Maggie del país de lo novelesco. ¡Luego, un largo silencio! Constanza estaba ahora enclaustrada con su padre, pues era su «turno» para cuidar de él; Maggie estaba fregando en su cueva y el señor Povey había desaparecido en su dormitorio. Entonces Sofía oyó a su madre llamar a la puerta de King Street a su manera viva e imperiosa. En la habitación, la penumbra había dejado paso definitivamente a la oscuridad nocturna. Sofía se adormeció y soñó. Cuando se despertó oyó llamar a una puerta. Se levantó de un salto, salió de puntillas al descansillo y se asomó por la balaustrada, desde donde se divisaba todo el pasillo del primer piso. Habían encendido el gas; por la abertura redonda del globo de porcelana veía la llama ondulante. Era su madre, aún con el sombrero puesto, la que estaba

llamando a la puerta de la habitación del señor Povey. Constanza se hallaba en la puerta de la habitación de su padre. La señora Baines llamó dos veces con un intervalo y después dijo a Constanza en un sonoro susurro que vibró por el pasillo:

—Parece estar profundamente dormido. Será mejor que no lo moleste.

—Pero ¿y si necesita algo por la noche?

—Bueno, niña, ya lo oiría yo moverse. Lo que más le conviene es dormir.

La señora Baines abandonó al señor Povey a los efectos del láudano y se marchó por el corredor. Era una mujer robusta, toda tela negra y cadena de oro, y su falda llenaba de sobras la anchura del pasillo. Sofía observó su gesto habitual al subir con esfuerzo los dos peldaños que dotaban de variedad al pasillo. Se detuvo junto al surtidor del gas y, poniendo la mano en la llave, dirigió la vista dentro del globo.

—¿Dónde está Sofía? —preguntó, con los ojos fijos en el gas mientras bajaba la llama.

—Debe de estar en la cama, madre —dijo Constanza con aire despreocupado.

Luego Constanza y su madre desaparecieron en el dormitorio y la puerta se cerró con un golpe suave y decisivo que dio a la silenciosa observadora del piso de arriba la impresión de crear una intimidad especial y excluyente entre las figuras de Constanza y su padre y su madre. La observadora se preguntó, no sin sentir el aguijón de los celos, de qué podrían estar hablando en el gran dormitorio; imaginó la larga barba de su padre meneándose débilmente y sus largos brazos sobre el cubrecama, a Constanza apoyada en un poste del pie de la cama y a su madre yendo de acá para allá, dejando su broche de camafeo en el tocador o estirando las arrugas de sus guantes. Era indudable que, de alguna sutil manera, Constanza tenía con sus padres una relación de mayor confianza que Sofía.

III

Cuando Constanza se fue a dormir, media hora después, Sofía estaba ya en la cama. La habitación era considerablemente espaciosa. Era el retiro y la fortaleza de las muchachas desde sus primeros años. Sus características eran para ellas tan naturales e inalterables como las de una cueva para un cavernícola. Se había vuelto a empapelar dos veces en vida de ellas y cada papel se destacaba en su memoria como una época; la tercera época se debía a la sustitución de una estera de lana por una resplandeciente alfombra vieja degradada del salón. Había una sola cama; los postes eran de hierro pintado; en aquella cama nunca se molestaban la una a la otra, pues dormían tan alejadas como si estuvieran en lados contrarios de la Plaza de San Lucas; sin embargo, si Constanza se hubiera acostado una noche en el lado de la ventana en vez de en el lado de la puerta sería como si se hubiese alterado la naturaleza secreta del universo. La pequeña chimenea estaba llena de una masa de recortes de papel de plata; ahora, las escasas enfermedades que habían padecido eran recordadas sobre todo como unas épocas en que se embutía el papel de plata en una gran caja de zapatillas que estaba colgada junto a la chimenea y en las que un fuego de brasas reinaba antinaturalmente en su sitio; el papel de plata formaba parte del orden del mundo. La ventana de guillotina no funcionaba del todo bien a causa de un leve rehundimiento de la pared, e incluso cuando estaba cerrada había siempre una estrecha rendija a la izquierda, entre la ventana y el marco; por esta rendija entraban corrientes, de modo que se recordaban escarchas muy acerbas por las noches, cuando el señor Baines hacía forzar la ventana y sujetarla totalmente subida por medio de cuñas; la rendija por la que entraba la intemperie formaba parte del orden del mundo.

Poseían sólo una cama, un lavabo y un tocador, pero en otros aspectos eran unas muchachas muy afortunadas, pues tenían dos armarios de caoba; esta mutua independencia en lo tocante a armarios se debía en parte al profundo sentido común de la señora Baines y en parte a la tendencia de su padre a mimarlas un poco. Tenían además una cómoda de frente curvado, estructura de la cual Constanza ocupaba dos cajones cortos y uno largo y Sofía dos largos. Sobre ella había dos costureros de fantasía, en los cuales cada una de las hermanas guardaba joyas, una libreta de ahorros y otros tesoros; estos costureros eran absolutamente sagrados para las respectivas propietarias. Eran distintos, pero ninguno más magnífico que el otro. Antes bien, era la norma de la habitación una rígida igualdad, cuya única excepción era que detrás de la puerta había tres ganchos, de los cuales Constanza mandaba sobre dos.

—Bueno —empezó Sofía—; ¿cómo está nuestro querido señor Povey? —Estaba tendida de espaldas y sonreía a sus dos manos, que levantaba delante de sí.

—Durmiendo —dijo Constanza—. Al menos eso cree mamá. Dice que lo que más le conviene es dormir.

—Es probable que le vuelva otra vez —dijo Sofía.

—¿Qué dices? —inquirió Constanza, que se estaba desnudando.

—Que es probable que le vuelva otra vez.

Aquellas palabras eran cita de las pronunciadas por el querido señor Povey en la escalera, y Sofía las dijo imitando con exactitud el manierismo vocal del señor Povey.

—Sofía —dijo Constanza con firmeza, acercándose a la cama—, ¡ojalá no fueras tan boba! —Con benevolencia, había pasado por alto la nota satírica que había en la primera observación de Sofía, pero un poderoso instinto se alzó en ella y se opuso a nuevas burlas—, ¡Desde luego, ya has hecho bastante para un solo día! —añadió.

Como respuesta, Sofía estalló en violentas carcajadas que ni intentó reprimir. Se rió demasiado tiempo y demasiado libremente, mientras Constanza la miraba fijamente.

—¡No me explico qué es lo que te ha pasado! —exclamó Constanza.

—¡Es que no puedo mirarla sin que me dé un ataque! —jadeó Sofía. Y mostró un diminuto objeto que tenía en la mano izquierda.

Constanza se sobresaltó, ruborizándose.

—¡No querrás decir que te la has guardado! —protestó con seriedad—. ¡Eres horrible, Sofía! Dámela ahora mismo para tirarla. Nunca he sabido de nadie que haya hecho nada parecido. ¡Dámela ahora mismo!

—¡No! —se negó Sofía, riendo aún—. No me separaría de ella por nada del mundo. ¡Es monísima!

Riéndose había desechado todo su secreto resentimiento contra Constanza por no haberle hecho caso en toda la tarde y por tener tanta intimidad con sus padres. Y estaba dispuesta a estar sinceramente jovial con Constanza.

—¡Dámela! —dijo Constanza con obstinación.

Sofía escondió la mano bajo sus ropas. —Quédate con ese otro viejo trozo, cuando aparezca, si quieres. Pero no con éste. ¡Qué lástima que sea el que no era!

—¡Sofía, me avergüenzo de ti! Dámela.

Entonces fue cuando Sofía se dio cuenta de lo seria que estaba Constanza. Se sintió asombrada y un poco intimidada por ello. Pues la expresión de Constanza, habitualmente tan benigna y serena, era dura, casi feroz. Sin embargo, Sofía tenía mucho de lo que se denomina «espíritu» y ni siquiera la ferocidad en el rostro de la blanda Constanza podía intimidarla más que unos pocos segundos. Su alegría se apagó y dejó de reír.

—No he dicho nada a mamá... —prosiguió Constanza.

—Espero que así sea —dijo Sofía lacónicamente.

—Pero de verdad que se lo diré si no tiras eso —acabó Constanza.

—Puedes decirle lo que quieras —replicó Sofía, añadiendo despectivamente un término oprobioso que estaba pasado de moda desde hacía mucho tiempo—. ¡Acusica!

—¿Vas a dármela o no?

—¡No!

Súbitamente se inició una batalla en la habitación. La atmósfera se alteró totalmente, como por arte de magia. La belleza de Sofía, la ternura angelical de Constanza y el encanto juvenil e inocente de las dos se transformaron en algo siniestro y cruel. Sofía se recostó en la almohada rodeada de su oscuro cabello y clavó

la vista con expresión de implacable desafío en los airados ojos de Constanza, que se erguía amenazante junto a la cama. Oían el silbido del gas sobre el tocador; sus corazones enviaban la sangre a las venas en desenfrenadas palpitaciones. Dejaron de ser jóvenes sin hacerse viejas; lo eterno había salido bruscamente de su sueño en ellas.

Constanza se dirigió al tocador, se soltó el pelo y empezó a cepillárselo, echando la cabeza hacia atrás, sacudiéndola e inclinándose hacia delante en los invariables gestos de ese rito. Estaba tan perturbada que sin darse cuenta había invertido el orden habitual de su *toilette*. Al momento Sofía se deslizó de la cama y, acercándose descalza a la cómoda, abrió su costurero y depositó el fragmento del señor Povey en su interior; dejó caer la tapa con un golpe intransigente, como si dijera: «¡A ver si a mí se me pisotea, señorita!». Sus ojos se encontraron en el espejo. Luego Sofía se volvió a la cama.

Pasados cinco minutos, cuando hubo terminado con su cabello, Constanza se arrodilló y rezó sus oraciones. Después de rezar, fue derecha al costurero de Sofía, lo abrió, cogió el fragmento del señor Povey, corrió a la ventana y lo tiró con frenesí a la Plaza metiéndolo por la rendija.

—¡Allá va! —exclamó con nerviosismo.

Ejecutó aquella inconcebible transgresión del código del honor, que superaba toda fechoría, antes de que Sofía pudiera recuperarse de la estupefacción de ver su sagrada caja insolentemente violada. En un solo instante, uno de los grandes ideales de Sofía quedó totalmente destruido, y encima por obra del ser más dulce y gentil que jamás conociera. Fue una reveladora experiencia para Sofía... y también para Constanza. Y les espantó a las dos por igual. Sofía, con la mirada fija en el texto que decía «Dios, tú me ves», enmarcado en paja y sobre la cómoda, no se movió. Estaba derrotada y se sentía tan profundamente conmovida en su derrota que ni siquiera reflexionaba acerca de la evidente ineficacia de los textos ilustrados para disuadir a los malhechores. ¡Tampoco es que le importara un bledo el fragmento del señor Povey! Era el aspecto moral del asunto y el sorprendente e inexplicable cambio sufrido por el carácter de Constanza lo que la dejó estupefacta, obligándola a aceptar en silencio lo inevitable.

Constanza, temblando, se esforzó en concluir de desnudarse con digna parsimonia. La conducta de Sofía al recibir el golpe parecía demasiado buena para ser verdad, pero le dio valor. Al cabo de un buen rato cerró el gas y se acostó junto a Sofía. Y se removió un poco y luego hubo silencio por un tiempo.

—Y, por si te interesa —dijo Constanza en un tono que mezclaba la cordialidad con la rectitud—, mamá ha decidido con la tía Harriet que las dos dejemos el colegio el próximo curso.

Capítulo III

UNA BATALLA

I

El día consagrado por la costumbre en las Cinco Ciudades para hacer pastas es el sábado. Pero la señora Baines hacía las suyas en viernes porque el sábado por la tarde, como es natural, había mucho trabajo en la tienda. Es cierto que la señora Baines hacía sus pastas por la mañana y que el sábado por la mañana en la tienda apenas se diferenciaba de cualquier otra mañana. No obstante, la señora Baines hacía las pastas el viernes por la mañana en lugar del sábado por la mañana porque la tarde del sábado había mucho trabajo en la tienda. De este modo tenía tiempo para hacer la compra el sábado por la mañana sin excesivo trajín.

La mañana después del primer ensayo odontológico de Sofía, por lo tanto, la señora Baines estaba haciendo pastas en la cocina subterránea. Aquella cocina, la cueva en la que moraba Maggie, poseía el misterio de una iglesia y en los días oscuros el de una cripta. Los peldaños de piedra que bajaban hasta ella desde el nivel de la tierra carecían totalmente de luz. Uno los tanteaba con los pies de la fe, y cuando llegaba a la cocina, ésta, en contraste, parecía luminosa y alegre; tal vez el arquitecto lo tuviese en cuenta y el efecto de la escalera fuese deliberado. La cocina recibía la luz del día a través de una gran ventana poco profunda cuya parte superior tocaba el techo y cuya parte inferior estuvo fuera del alcance de las muchachas hasta mucho tiempo después de que empezaran a ir al colegio. Sus cristales eran pequeños y la mitad de ellos eran de los del tipo de «nudo», a través de los cuales no se podía distinguir objeto alguno; la otra mitad eran de fecha posterior y resistían la marcha de la civilización. La vista desde la ventana se componía de las amplias ventanas, de vidrio cilindrado, de la recién construida bodega «del Sol» y de las piernas y faldas que pasaban. Una sólida rejilla de alambre protegía la cocina de todo exceso de iluminación y asimismo protegía los cristales de los caprichos de los transeúntes de King Street. Los arrapiezos tenían la manía de pararse a dar patadas a la rejilla con todas sus fuerzas.

Las paredes de la cocina estaban adornadas de nomeolvides en un campo marrón. Su techo era irregular y mugriento; estaba atravesado por una viga, en la cual había dos ganchos, y de estos ganchos colgaban antaño las cuerdas de un columpio, muy utilizado por Constanza y Sofía en los viejos tiempos, hasta que se hicieron mayores. El resto del mobiliario comprendía una mesa —pegada a la pared de enfrente del horno—, una alacena y dos sillas Windsor. Al otro lado del arranque de la escalera había una entrada sin puerta que daba a las dos despensas, todavía más tenebrosas que la cocina, con algunos vagos rincones que hacía visible el encalado; en ellos reposaban en alacenas cuencos de leche, platos de huesos fríos y restos de fruta; en la esquina más próxima a la cocina había un gran serón donde se guardaba el pan. Otra entrada, al otro lado de la cocina, daba a la primera carbonera, donde estaba también la tabla de lavar con su grifo, y desde allí un túnel conducía a la segunda carbonera, donde se almacenaban el carbón y las cenizas; el túnel continuaba hasta un lejano patio diminuto y de éste, pasando por detrás de la farmacia del señor Critchlow, podía uno salir, sorprendido, a Brougham Street. La sensación que producían las vastas tinieblas de aquellas regiones que empezaban en lo alto de la escalera de la cocina y acababan en los oscuros rincones de las despensas o abruptamente en la vulgar cotidianidad de Brougham Street, una sensación que Constanza y Sofía conocían desde la infancia, y que permaneció en ellas casi sin deterioro mientras se fueron haciendo mayores.

La señora Baines llevaba un vestido de alpaca negra protegido por un delantal blanco cuyos cordones atraían la atención a la amplitud de su cintura. Iba arremangada y tenía las manos cubiertas hasta los nudillos de harina mojada. Su eterno tablero para hacer pastas ocupaba una esquina de la mesa y cerca de él se hallaban el rodillo, la mantequilla, algunas fuentes, manzanas trituradas, azúcar y otras cosas. Aquellas manos sonrosadas se afanaban dentro de una sustancia pegajosa, en un gran cuenco blanco.

—Mamá, ¿estás ahí? —se oyó una voz que venía de arriba.

—Sí, cariño.

Sonaron en la escalera unos pasos al parecer reacios y vacilantes y Sofía entró en la cocina.

—Recógeme ese mechón —dijo la señora Baines, bajando un poco la cabeza y levantando las enharinadas manos, que no podían tocar más que harina—. Gracias; me estaba molestando. Y ahora quítate de

la luz. Tengo prisa. Tengo que ir a la tienda para mandar al dentista al señor Povey. ¿Qué hace Constanza?

—Ayudar a Maggie a hacer la cama del señor Povey.

—¡Ah!

Aunque gruesa, la señora Baines era una mujer bonita, con un hermoso cabello castaño y unos ojos serenos que mostraban seguridad en sí misma y fe en su propia capacidad para llevar a cabo cualquier cosa para la que se la llamase. No aparentaba ni más ni menos de su edad, cuarenta y cinco años. No había nacido en la región; la había escogido su esposo en la ciudad de Axe, en los páramos, a doce millas de distancia. Como casi todas las mujeres que se establecen en tierra extraña al casarse, en el fondo de su corazón se consideraba un poquitín superior a la tierra extraña y a sus costumbres. Este sentimiento, confirmado por una larga experiencia, nunca la había abandonado. Era este sentimiento el que la inducía a seguir haciendo sus propias pastas ¡habiendo en la casa dos «chicas mayores» educadas a fondo! Constanza sabía hacer buenas pastas, pero no eran las pastas de su madre. En materia de repostería se podía enseñar todo menos la «mano», ligera y firme, que empuña el rodillo. Se nace con esa mano o sin ella. Y si se nace sin ella son imposibles los más altos vuelos de la repostería. Constanza había nacido sin ella. Había días en los que Sofía parecía poseerla, pero había otros en los que no había quien se comiera las pastas de Sofía, con excepción de Maggie. Así pues, la señora Baines, aunque estaba muy orgullosa de sus hijas y las quería mucho, seguía mirándolas justificadamente con cierta condescendencia. Abrigaba sinceras dudas de que alguna de ellas llegara a ser igual a su madre.

—¡Ya está bien, brujita! —exclamó. Sofía estaba robando y comiéndose trocitos de manzana medio cocida—. ¡Esto pasa por no desayunar! ¿Y por qué no bajaste anoche a cenar?

—No sé. Se me olvidó.

La señora Baines examinó los ojos de la chiquilla, que se encontraron con los suyos con una especie de desafiante osadía. Sabía todo lo que puede saber una madre de su hija y estaba segura de que Sofía no tenía ningún motivo para estar indispuesta. Por lo tanto la miró a los ojos con ligera aprensión.

—Si no encuentras nada mejor que hacer —dijo—, úntame este plato con mantequilla. ¿Tienes las manos limpias? No, mejor no lo toques.

La señora Baines estaba en aquel momento en la fase de depositar pequeñas porciones de mantequilla formando hileras en una gran extensión de pasta. ¡La mejor mantequilla fresca! La mantequilla de guisar, por no decir la manteca, era desconocida en aquella cocina los viernes por la mañana. Dobló la extensión de pasta enrollando la mantequilla dentro, ¡una operación suprema!

—¿Te ha dicho Constanza que vais a dejar el colegio? —inquirió la señora Baines, pasando a algo más trivial, mientras recortaba la pasta para ajustarla a la forma de una fuente.

—Sí —replicó Sofía con brusquedad. Después se acercó al horno. Había un tenedor de tostar en la alacena y se puso a jugar con él.

—Bueno, ¿estás contenta? La tía Harriet piensa que ya sois lo bastante mayores para dejarlo. Y como habíamos decidido que de todas maneras Constanza lo iba a dejar, en realidad es mucho más sencillo que lo dejéis las dos juntas.

—Mamá —dijo Sofía, haciendo ruido con el tenedor de tostar—, ¿Qué voy a hacer cuando salga del colegio?

—Espero —contestó la señora Baines con el tono sentencioso que ni el más inteligente de los progenitores lo es lo bastante como para prescindir de él—, espero que las dos hagáis todo lo posible para ayudar a vuestra madre... y a vuestro padre —añadió.

—Sí —dijo Sofía, irritada—. Pero yo ¿qué voy a hacer?

—Eso ya se verá. Como Constanza va a aprender el ramo de la sombrerería de señora, he pensado que tú podrías empezar a echar una mano con la ropa interior, guantes, seda y demás. Así entre las dos podréis un día llevar muy bien todo este lado de la tienda, y yo...

—Yo no quiero ir a la tienda, mamá.

Aquella interrupción fue hecha en una voz aparentemente fría y hostil. La señora Baines le dirigió una

rápida mirada sin que lo observase la chiquilla, cuyo rostro estaba vuelto hacia el fuego. Se tenía por una cumplida experta en la interpretación de los humores de Sofía; sin embargo, contemplando aquella espalda recta y aquella cabeza orgullosa, no sospechó que toda la esencia y el ser de Sofía estaban implorando comprensión, callada pero intensamente.

—Me gustaría que dejaras en paz ese tenedor —dijo la señora Baines, con una curiosa y lúgubre cortesía que a menudo caracterizaba las relaciones con sus hijas.

El tenedor de tostar cayó al suelo de ladrillo después de rebotar en el cubo de la ceniza. Sofía lo volvió a colocar apresuradamente en la alacena.

—Entonces ¿qué piensas hacer? —continuó la señora Baines, venciendo el fastidio causado por el tenedor de tostar—. Creo que soy yo quien tendría que preguntarte a ti y no tú a mí. ¿Qué piensas hacer? Tu padre y yo esperábamos que os dedicaríais a la tienda y trataríais de compensarnos por todo el...

La señora Baines no estaba muy acertada aquella mañana con su modo de expresarse. Lo cierto es que era una madre excepcional, pero aquella mañana parecía ser incapaz de evitar las absurdas pretensiones que los padres de aquellos tiempos daban por supuestas con toda sinceridad y que todo buen hijo aceptaba dócilmente.

Sofía no era una buena hija y en su fuero interno rechazaba con obstinación ese principio cardinal de la familia, a saber, que el progenitor ha otorgado a su vástago un supremo favor al traerlo al mundo. Interrumpió de nuevo a su madre sin miramientos.

—No quiero dejar el colegio —dijo con apasionamiento.

—Pero tendrás que dejarlo más tarde o más temprano —argumentó la señora Baines, con aire de razonar serenamente y poniéndose al nivel de su hija—. No puedes quedarte en el colegio para siempre ¿verdad, cariño? ¡Quita de en medio!

Atravesó apresuradamente la cocina con una empanada que metió en el homo, cerrando la puerta de hierro con gesto cuidadoso.

—Sí —replicó Sofía—; quiero ser maestra. Eso es lo que quiero.

—¿Maestra de escuela? —inquirió la señora Baines.

—Por supuesto. ¿De qué si no, aquí? —dijo Sofía en tono cortante—, Con la señorita Chetwynd.

—No creo que a tu padre le gustara —repuso la señora Baines—. Estoy segura de que no le gustaría.

—¿Por qué no?

—No sería apropiado.

—¿Por qué no, mamá? —preguntó la muchacha con una especie de ferocidad. Se había apartado del homo. Unos pies de hombre centellearon al pasar por delante de la ventana.

La señora Baines estaba sorprendida y sobresaltada. La actitud de Sofía le colmaba verdaderamente la paciencia; era necesario corregir sus modales. Pero no eran estos fenómenos lo que afectaba tanto a la señora Baines; estaba acostumbrada a ellos y había llegado a considerarlos en cierto modo como inevitable acompañamiento de la belleza de Sofía, como el castigo de aquel encanto insuperable que ocasionalmente emanaba de la muchacha como un resplandor. Lo que sorprendía y sobresaltaba a la señora Baines era la completa e impensable locura del plan infantil de Sofía. Fue una revelación para la señora Baines. ¿Por qué, en nombre de Dios, se le había metido semejante idea en la cabeza? Las huérfanas, las viudas y las solteronas de cierta edad lanzadas de repente al mundo: ésas eran las mujeres que de forma natural se hacían maestras, porque tenían que hacerse algo. Pero que la hija de unos padres acomodados, rodeada de amor y de los placeres de un hogar excelente, deseara enseñar en una escuela era algo que estaba más allá de los horizontes del sentido común de la señora Baines. Los padres acomodados de hoy en día que tengan dificultades para comprender a la señora Baines deben imaginar cuáles serían sus sentimientos si sus Sofías mostraran el grosero deseo de seguir la vocación de chófer.

—Tendrías que estar demasiado tiempo fuera de casa —dijo la señora Baines, terminando otra empanada.

Hablaba en tono suave. No había desaprovechado la experiencia de ser la madre de Sofía desde hacía

casi dieciséis años y, aunque ahora estaba descubriendo peligros inimaginados en el errático temperamento de Sofía, conservó suficiente presencia de ánimo para comportarse con diplomática blandura. Sin duda era humillante para una madre verse obligada a utilizar la diplomacia en su trato con una chicuela de manga corta. En sus tiempos las madres eran autocráticas. Pero Sofía era Sofía.

—¿Y qué? —inquirió Sofía en tono cortante.

—Y en Bursley no hay —dijo la señora Baines.

—La señorita Chetwynd me tomaría, y después, pasado un tiempo, podría irme con su hermana.

—¿Su hermana? ¿Qué hermana?

—La que tiene un colegio grande en alguna parte de Londres.

La señora Baines ocultó su emoción sin precedentes mirando la primera empanada, en el horno. La empanada iba bien, a pesar de las circunstancias. En aquellos escasos segundos reflexionó rápidamente y decidió que a grandes males había que aplicar grandes remedios.

¡Londres! Ella misma no había pasado nunca de Manchester. ¡Londres, «pasado un tiempo»! ¡No, la diplomacia estaría fuera de lugar en esta crisis de crecimiento de Sofía!

—Sofía —dijo con voz mutada y solemne, enfrentándose a su hija y manteniendo lejos del delantal las manos enharinadas y llenas de sortijas—. No sé qué es lo que te pasa. ¡De verdad que no lo sé! Tu padre y yo estamos dispuestos a aguantar hasta cierto punto, pero hay que poner un límite. Lo que ocurre es que te hemos mimado demasiado y en vez de ir a mejor al hacerte mayor estás yendo a peor. Ahora, por favor, no quiero volver a oír hablar del asunto. Me gustaría que imitaras un poco más a tu hermana. Por supuesto, si no quieres hacer tu parte en la tienda, nadie puede obligarte. Si decides andar haciendo el vago por la casa, tendremos que soportarlo. Lo único que podemos hacer es aconsejarte por tu propio bien. Pero en cuanto a eso... —se detuvo y dejó hablar al silencio, y después concluyó—, que no vuelva a oír hablar de ello.

Fue un discurso enérgico e imponente, enunciado con claridad en un tono que la señora Baines no había empleado desde que despidió hacía cinco años a una joven dependienta de conducta liviana.

—Pero, mamá...

En lo alto de la escalera de piedra resonó una conmoción de cubos. Era Maggie, que bajaba de los dormitorios. La familia Baines se pasaba la vida haciendo todo lo posible para guardarse sus asuntos para sí, suponiendo que Maggie y todo el personal de la tienda (con la posible excepción del señor Povey) estaban obsesionados por un voraz apetito de lo que no les importaba. En consecuencia, las voces de los Baines siempre enmudecían o se convertían en un sofocado y misterioso susurro siempre que se oían pasos de alguien que pudiera escuchar a escondidas.

La señora Baines se puso un dedo delante de su doble papada.

—Ya basta —dijo de forma terminante.

Apareció Maggie, y Sofía, con brusca precipitación, desapareció escaleras arriba.

II

—Bueno, señor Povey, la verdad es que esto no es propio de usted —dijo la señora Baines, que, de camino a la tienda, había descubierto al Indispensable en el taller de cortar.

Es cierto que el taller de cortar era casi el santuario del señor Povey, al cual se retiraba de vez en cuando para cortar trajes y prendas sueltas para el departamento de sastrería. Es cierto que el departamento de sastrería recibía abundantes encargos, empleando a varios sastres que trabajaban en sus propias casas y que constantemente se daba cita a clientes para probarse en aquella pieza. Pero estas consideraciones no afectaron a la actitud desaprobadora de la señora Baines.

—Sólo estaba cortando este traje para el ministro —dijo el señor Povey.

El reverendo Murley, superintendente del circuito metodista wesleyano, visitaba al señor Baines todas las semanas. En una visita reciente, el señor Baines había observado que la chaqueta del párroco estaba adquiriendo un tono verdoso de puro vieja y había ordenado que se le hiciese un traje nuevo para regalárselo al señor Murley. Éste, que albergaba una auténtica pasión medieval por las almas y que había gastado su dinero y su salud en nombre de Cristo, había aceptado el ofrecimiento estrictamente en nombre de Cristo y había explicado pormenorizadamente al señor Povey la necesidad que tenía Cristo de variopintos bolsillos.

—Eso ya lo veo —replicó ácidamente la señora Baines—, Pero no es razón para que esté usted sin chaqueta, y encima en esta habitación tan fría. ¡Teniendo dolor de muelas!

El hecho era que el señor Povey siempre se quitaba la chaqueta para cortar. En vez de chaqueta se ponía una cinta métrica.

—Ya no me duele la muela —dijo tímidamente, dejando las grandes tijeras y cogiendo un trozo de tiza.

—¡Bobadas! —exclamó la señora Baines.

Aquella exclamación escandalizó al señor Povey. No era desconocida en labios de la señora Baines, pero por lo general la reservaba para los miembros de su propio sexo. El señor Povey no recordaba que la hubiera aplicado a ninguna aseveración suya. «¿Qué le pasa a esta mujer?», pensó. El que tuviera la cara enrojecida no le ayudó a responder a la pregunta, pues siempre la tenía así después de las operaciones del viernes en la cocina.

—Todos los hombres son iguales —prosiguió la señora Baines—. Sólo pensar en el dentista ya les cura. ¿Por qué no va ahora mismo a ver al señor Critchlow y se la saca, como un hombre?

El señor Critchlow sacaba muelas; la muestra de su establecimiento rezaba «Huesero y farmacéutico». Pero el señor Povey tenía sus propias opiniones.

—No me fío del señor Critchlow como dentista —dijo.

—Entonces, por Dios, vaya a Oulsnam.

—¿Cuándo? Ahora me viene mal y mañana es sábado.

—¿Por qué no puede ir ahora?

—Bueno, por supuesto podría ir ahora —admitió.

—Permítame aconsejarle que vaya, pues, y no vuelva con esa muela en la boca. Si no, voy a hacerle meterse en la cama. ¡Vamos, muestre un poco de valor!

—¡Oh! ¡Valor...! —protestó, ofendido.

En aquel momento se acercaba Constanza por el pasillo cantando.

—¡Constanza, cariño! —llamó la señora Baines.

—Voy, mamá —asomó la cabeza por la puerta de la habitación—. ¡Oh! —el señor Povey se estaba poniendo la chaqueta.

—El señor Povey va a ir al dentista.

—Sí; me voy ahora mismo —confirmó el señor Povey.

—¡Oh! ¡Me alegro mucho! —exclamó Constanza. Su rostro expresaba una pura simpatía, sin mezcla de sentimientos de crítica. El señor Povey se bañó en aquella simpatía y decidió que debía mostrase como un hombre de roble y de hierro.

—Con estas cosas, lo mejor es acabar cuanto antes —dijo con severa indiferencia—. Voy por el abrigo.

—Aquí está —dijo Constanza al momento. El abrigo y el sombrero del señor Povey estaban colgados en un gancho en el pasillo, al lado de la puerta del taller. La joven le tendió el abrigo, deseosa de ser útil.

—No te he dicho que vengas para que le hagas de ayuda de cámara al señor Povey —dijo para sí la

señora Baines en tono levemente adusto; y en voz alta—: No puedo quedarme mucho rato en la tienda, Constanza, pero puedes quedarte tú hasta que vuelva el señor Povey, ¿verdad? Y si pasa algo subes corriendo y me lo dices.

—Sí, mamá —consintió ansiosamente Constanza. Vaciló y luego se dispuso a obedecer al instante.

—Quiero hablar antes contigo, querida —la detuvo la señora Baines; su tono era peculiar, cargado de importancia, confidencial y por tanto muy halagador para Constanza.

—Creo que saldré por la puerta lateral —dijo el señor Povey—, Está más cerca.

Así era. Se ahorraba unas diez yardas en dos millas saliendo por la puerta lateral en vez de por la tienda. ¿Quién podía sospechar que le daba vergüenza que le vieran ir al dentista, temeroso de que, si iba por la tienda, la señora Baines le siguiera e hiciera delante de los dependientes alguna observación perjudicial para su dignidad? (La señora Baines podía sospecharlo y lo hizo).

—La cinta métrica no le va a hacer falta —le dijo secamente la señora Baines cuando él abría la puerta lateral. Los extremos de la cinta métrica le colgaban debajo de la chaqueta y el abrigo.

—¡Oh! —el señor Povey frunció el ceño por su despiste.

—La dejaré en su sitio —terció Constanza, ofreciéndose para recibir la cinta.

—Gracias —dijo con gravedad el señor Povey—, No creo que tarden mucho para el poco trabajo que les voy a dar —añadió con una trabajosa y desdichada sonrisa.

Luego se fue por King Street aparentando gozosa ligereza *y* digno júbilo por la espléndida mañana de mayo. Pero en su cobarde corazón humano no había ninguna mañana de mayo.

—¡Eh! ¡Povey! —llamó una voz desde la Plaza.

Pero el señor Povey no hacía caso a llamamiento alguno. Se había puesto en marcha y no quería mirar hacia atrás.

—¡Eh! ¡Povey!

Inútil.

La señora Baines y Constanza estaban en la puerta. Un hombre de mediana edad cruzaba en aquel momento la calle desde Boulton Terrace, el altivo conjunto de tiendas nuevas que el envidioso resto de la Plaza había dado en calificar de «ostentoso». Saludó con la mano a la señora Baines, que mantuvo la puerta abierta.

—Es el doctor Harrop —dijo a Constanza—, No me extrañaría que por fin viniera ese bebé y él quisiera decírselo al señor Povey.

Constanza se ruborizó, llena de orgullo. La señora Povey, esposa del célebre primo de «nuestro señor Povey», el confitero y panadero de primera de Boulton Terrace, era tema frecuente de discusión en la familia Baines, pero era la primera vez que la señora Baines reconocía en presencia de Constanza el marcado y creciente cambio que había caracterizado el estado de la señora Povey en los meses recientes. Semejante franqueza por parte de su madre, tras la decisión de que saliesen del colegio, probaba sin duda que Constanza había dejado de ser una chiquilla.

—Buenos días, doctor.

El médico, que llevaba un maletín y vestía bombachos de montar (fue el último médico de Bursley en abandonar la silla por la carretela), saludó y enderezó su largo y negro tronco.

—¡Buenas! ¡Buenas, señorita! Pues ha sido un niño.

—¿Qué? ¿Allá? —preguntó la señora Baines señalando la pastelería.

El doctor Harrop asintió con la cabeza.

—Quería informarle —dijo, encogiendo el hombro en dirección al arrogante cobarde.

—¿Qué te dije, Constanza? —dijo la señora Baines, volviéndose hacia su hija.

La confusión de Constanza igualaba a su placer. El avispado doctor se había detenido al pie de los dos escalones y con una mano en el bolsillo de sus amplios bombachos contemplaba, con sonrientes ojillos, a la voluminosa matrona y a la esbelta doncella.

—Sí —prosiguió—. Ha costado casi toda la noche. ¡Difícil! ¡Difícil!

—Espero que haya ido todo bien.

—Oh, sí. ¡Un niño estupendo! ¡Estupendo! Pero ha causado problemas a su madre, a pesar de todo. ¿Nada nuevo? —esta vez levantó los ojos para señalar el dormitorio del señor Baines.

—No —respondió la señora Baines, cambiando de expresión.

—¿Sigue animado?

—Sí.

—¡Bien! Que tengan muy buenos días.

Se encaminó hacia su casa, que estaba más abajo en la misma calle.

—Espero que ahora pase una nueva página —observó la señora Baines a Constanza al cerrar la puerta. Constanza sabía que su madre se refería a la mujer del confitero; dedujo que la esperanza era en extremo débil.

—¿De qué querías hablarme, mamá? —preguntó como manera de salir de su deliciosa confusión.

—Cierra esa puerta —replicó la señora Baines señalando la que daba al pasadizo; mientras Constanza obedecía, ella cerró la de la escalera. Entonces dijo, en voz baja y cautelosa:

—¿Qué es todo eso de que Sofía quiere ser maestra?

—¿Que quiere ser maestra? —repitió Constanza con asombro.

—Sí. ¿No te ha dicho nada?

—¡Ni una palabra!

—¡Bueno, esto es increíble! Quiere irse con la señorita Chetwynd y ser maestra—. La señora Baines estuvo a punto de añadir que Sofía había mencionado Londres. Pero se contuvo. Hay cosas que uno no puede persuadirse a decir. Añadió: —¡En vez de ir a la tienda!

—¡Nunca he sabido nada de tal cosa! —murmuró Constanza con voz entrecortada por la sorpresa. Estaba enrollando la cinta métrica del señor Povey.

—¡Ni yo tampoco! —exclamó la señora Baines.

—¿Y la vas a dejar, mamá?

—¡Tu padre y yo no lo haríamos ni en sueños! —repuso la señora Baines con serena pero terrible decisión—. Sólo te lo he mencionado porque pensaba que Sofía te habría dicho algo.

—¡No, mamá!

Al meter la cinta métrica del señor Povey en su cajón, debajo de la mesa de cortar, Constanza pensó en lo seria que era la vida, entre bebés y Sofías. Estaba muy orgullosa de la confianza de su madre; este sencillo orgullo llenaba su ardiente seno de una conmoción muy agradable. Y ella quería ayudar a todos, demostrar de alguna manera cómo quería y comprendía a todos. Ni siquiera la locura de Sofía debilitó su anhelo de consolarla.

Aquella tarde estuvieron buscando a Sofía, a quien nadie había visto desde la hora de comer. Fue descubierta por su madre, en el salón, sola y sin hacer nada. La circunstancia era en sí misma bastante peculiar, pues los días laborables no utilizaban nunca el salón, ni siquiera las muchachas en los días de fiesta excepto para tocar el piano. Sin embargo, la señora Baines no hizo ningún comentario acerca de la localización geográfica de Sofía ni de su ociosidad.

—Hija mía —dijo desde la puerta, con un tímido esfuerzo por comportarse como si nada hubiera sucedido—¿quieres venir un rato con tu padre?

—Sí, mamá —respondió Sofía, con una especie de fría celeridad.

—Viene Sofía, querido —dijo la señora Baines junto a la puerta abierta del dormitorio, que formaba un ángulo recto con la del salón, junto a ella. Luego marchó entre frufrús por el pasillo y entró en el entresuelo, desde donde la había llamado su madre.

Sofía entró en el dormitorio, la eterna prisión del señor Baines. Aunque a causa de su inquietud nerviosa nunca lo dejaban solo, no formaba parte de los deberes habituales de las muchachas ir a pasar un rato con él. La persona que se hacía cargo de la mayor parte de las vigilias era una cierta tía María, que las muchachas sabían que no era una tía de verdad, no una tía enérgica y eficaz como la tía Harriet de Axe, sino una prima segunda pobre de John Baines; uno de esos parientes necesitados y lastimosos que tantas veces hacen difícil la vida a una gran familia en una ciudad pequeña. La existencia de la tía María, tras haber constituido una especie de «prueba» para los Baines, en los últimos doce años se había convertido en algo absolutamente «providencial» para ellos. (Hay que recordar que en aquellos tiempos la Providencia todavía se ocupaba de los asuntos cotidianos de todo el mundo y preveía el futuro de la manera más extraordinaria. Así, habiendo previsto que John Baines sufriría un «ataque» y necesitaría una enfermera leal e infatigable, se había anticipado cincuenta años creando a la tía María y la había mantenido con todo esmero sumida en la desdicha para que en el momento adecuado estuviera preparada para hacer frente al ataque. Ésta es al menos la única teoría que puede explicar el uso que hacían los Baines, y en realidad todo el Bursley pensante, de la palabra «providencial» en relación con la tía María.) Era una mujercilla reseca, capaz de pasar doce horas al día sentada en una habitación, y tal régimen le sentaba de maravilla. Por la noche se iba a su casita de Brougham Street; tenía libres la tarde de los jueves y por lo general los domingos, y en las vacaciones escolares sólo tenía que acudir cuando le apetecía o cuando se lo permitía la limpieza de la casita. Por ello, los días de fiesta el señor Baines era una mayor carga para la familia que en otras ocasiones y sus enfermeras se turnaban según las contingencias del momento y no por un programa establecido de horas.

La tragedia en diez mil actos cuyo escenario era aquel dormitorio escapaba casi a la percepción de Sofía, al igual que a la de Constanza. Sofía entró en él como si no fuese más que un dormitorio, con sus majestuosos muebles de caoba, sus cortinas de reps carmesí (con ribete dorado) y su cubrecama blanco adornado con numerosas borlas. Tenía cuatro años cuando el señor Baines había sufrido un repentino mareo en la escalera de la tienda, se había caído y, sin perder la consciencia, había dejado de ser John Baines para transformarse en un curioso y patético vestigio de John Baines. Ella no tenía ni idea del estremecimiento que recorrió la ciudad aquella noche, cuando se supo que John Baines había sufrido un ataque, que su brazo y su pierna izquierdos y su párpado derecho estaban paralizados y que el activo miembro del consejo local, el orador, el trabajador religioso, la vida misma de la vida de la ciudad, estaba acabado para siempre. Nunca había sabido nada de la crisis por la que había pasado su madre, con la ayuda de la tía Harriet, y de la que había salido triunfante. No tenía edad suficiente ni siquiera para sospecharlo. No tenía sino recuerdos muy vagos de su padre antes de que éste hubiera terminado con el mundo. Lo conocía simplemente como un organismo en una cama, un organismo cuyo lado izquierdo estaba inutilizado, cuyos ojos estaban con frecuencia inflamados, que no tenía pliegues desde la nariz hasta los rincones de la boca como otras personas, que tenía dificultades para comer porque la comida se le metía, no se sabe cómo, entre las encías y la mejilla, que dormía mucho pero estaba excesivamente agitado cuando estaba despierto, que al parecer oía lo que se le decía mucho rato después de que se le hubiera dicho, como si el sentido tuviera que viajar millas por pasadizos laberínticos hasta su cerebro, y que hablaba muy bajo con voz débil y temblorosa.

Y se hacía una idea de aquel cerebro remoto como si tuviera una mancha roja, pues una vez había preguntado Constanza: «Mamá, ¿por qué le dio un ataque a papá?» Y la señor Baines le había contestado: «Tuvo una hemorragia en el cerebro, hija mía, aquí» —y puso un dedo con el dedal en una parte determinada de la cabeza de Sofía.

No sólo Constanza y Sofía no habían percibido nunca la tragedia de su padre; la propia señora Baines había dejado en buena medida de percibirla; tales son los efectos de la costumbre. Hasta el destruido organismo recordaba de manera parcial e intermitente que antaño fue John Baines. Y si la señora Baines no se

hubiera ido formando, por un hábito de años, la gigantesca ficción de que aquel organismo seguía siendo la suprema cabeza consultiva de la familia, si el señor Critchlow no se hubiera empeñado en seguir tratándolo como a un viejo camarada, la masa de nervios vivos y muertos que había en el rico lecho Victoriano no habría tenido más importancia que alguna tía María en un caso parecido. Estas dos personas, su esposa y su amigo, lograban mantenerlo moralmente vivo alimentando incansablemente su importancia y su dignidad. La hazaña era un milagro de obstinado autoengaño, devoción espléndidamente ciega y orgullo incorregible.

Cuando Sofía entró en el dormitorio, el paralítico la siguió con una nerviosa mirada hasta que se sentó en el extremo del sofá, a los pies de la cama. Pareció estudiarla durante largo rato y luego murmuró con su voz tenue, debilitada e irregular:

—¿Es Sofía?

—Sí, papá —respondió ella animadamente.

Y tras otra pausa, dijo el viejo:

—¡Sí! Es Sofía.

Y luego:

—Tu madre dijo que te enviaría.

Sofía vio que aquél era uno de sus días malos, torpes. Tenía de vez en cuando días de relativa agilidad en los que su juicio captaba casi con facilidad el significado de los fenómenos externos.

Después, su rostro amarillento y su larga barba blanca empezaron a deslizarse por la empinada pendiente de las almohadas y en su ojo izquierdo apareció una mirada preocupada. Sofía se levantó y, pasándole las manos por debajo de las axilas, lo enderezó en la cama. No pesaba mucho, pero sólo una muchacha fuerte de su edad podría haberlo hecho.

—¡Sí! —murmuró él— Es ella. Es ella.

Y con su mano derecha, la que podía controlar, tomó la de la joven, que estaba en pie junto a la cama. Ella era tan joven y lozana, tal encamación del espíritu de la salud, y él tan dominado por la desintegración y la corrupción, que en aquel contacto de un cuerpo con cuerpo parecía haber algo de antinatural y repulsivo. Pero Sofía no lo consideraba así.

—Sofía —se dirigió a ella, e inició unos ruidos preparatorios en la garganta mientras ella aguardaba.

Continuó tras un intervalo, agarrando ahora el brazo de Sofía:

—Tu madre me ha dicho que no quieres ir a la tienda.

Ella volvió los ojos hacia él y la oscura y ansiosa mirada de su padre se encontró con la suya. La joven asintió con la cabeza.

—No, Sofía —musitó el señor Baines en voz casi inaudible—. Me sorprende en ti... ¡El comercio va mal, mal! ¿Tú sabes que el comercio va mal? —seguía agarrándole el brazo.

Ella asintió de nuevo con la cabeza. Sabía, en efecto, lo mal que iba el comercio a causa de una vaga guerra en Estados Unidos. Las palabras «el Norte» y «el Sur» se repetían de forma habitual en las conversaciones de los adultos. Eso era todo cuanto sabía, aunque la gente se moría de hambre en las Cinco Ciudades igual que en Manchester.

—Está tu madre —su pensamiento avanzaba dificultosamente, como un caballo viejo por un camino empinado—, |Está tu madre! —repitió, como si quisiera dirigir la atención de Sofía al espectáculo de su madre —, ¡Trabajando mucho! Con... Constanza y tú debéis ayudarla... ¡El comercio está mal! ¿Qué puedo hacer yo... aquí tumbado?

Sus secos dedos calentaban el brazo de Sofía. Ella quería moverse, pero no podía retirar el brazo sin parecer impaciente. Por la misma razón no podía apartar la mirada. Un arrebol que se iba intensificando aumentó el brillo de su inmaduro encanto cuando se inclinó sobre él. Pero, aun estando tan cerca, él no podía percibir su irradiación. Había dejado muy atrás la sensibilidad a la extraña influencia de la juventud y la belleza.

—¡Enseñar! —murmuró—, ¡No, no! No puedo permitir eso.

Entonces, la punta su barba blanca se levantó al dirigir él la mirada al techo reflexivamente.

—¿Me entiendes? —preguntó finalmente.

Ella hizo otra vez un gesto de asentimiento; él soltó su brazo y Sofía se apartó. No podría haber pronunciado una palabra. Sus ojos estaban llenos de titilantes lágrimas. Lo ridículo de la escena había producido en ella una tristeza súbita y profunda. Poseía juventud y perfección física; rebosaba de energía, de sensación de capacidad vital; tenía toda la vida por delante; cuando apretaba los labios se sentía capaz de superar a cualquiera en firmeza de decisión. Siempre había odiado la tienda. No entendía cómo su madre y Constanza podían adoptar una actitud deferente y halagadora con todo cliente que entraba. No; no lo entendía, pero su madre (aun siendo una mujer orgullosa) y Constanza parecían comportarse así de una manera tan natural, tan indiscutible, que nunca había comunicado sus sentimientos a ninguna de las dos; sospechaba que nunca la comprenderían. Pero hacía mucho tiempo había resuelto que jamás «iría a la tienda». Sabía que tenía que hacer algo y se había decidido por la enseñanza como la única posibilidad. Aquellas decisiones formaban parte de su vida interior desde hacía años. No había hablado de ellas, pues era reservada y no tenía ningún deseo de crear una situación desagradable. Pero poco a poco se había ido preparando para aludir a ellas. El extraordinario anuncio de que iba a dejar el colegio al mismo tiempo que Constanza la había cogido desprevenida, antes de que estuviera completa la preparación que maduraba en su mente; antes, por decirlo así, de disponerse lanza en ristre para la refriega. La habían pillado por sorpresa y las fuerzas enemigas habían obtenido ventaja. Pero ¿se creían que estaba vencida?

Su madre no le había dado ninguna razón. No quería saber nada. ¡Sólo un cortante y altivo «¡Que no vuelva a oír hablar de ello!». ¡Y de este modo, con una palabra, había de verse burlado y sacrificado el gran deseo de toda su vida, nutrido año tras año en el fondo de su alma! Su madre no parecía ridícula en aquel asunto, pues era un poder auténtico, que infundía por turnos amor auténtico y odio auténtico y siempre, hasta entonces, obediencia y el respeto de la razón. Era su padre el que parecía trágicamente ridículo y, a su vez, todo el movimiento en contra de ella se tornaba grotesco de puro absurdo. ¡Allí estaba aquella vieja ruina, indefensa, inútil, incapaz —sencillamente patética—, creyendo realmente que no tenía más que farfullar para que ella «entendiera»! Él no sabía nada; no se enteraba de nada; era un feroz egoísta, como la mayoría de los inválidos confinados al lecho, sin contacto con la vida: ¡y se creía con justificación para determinar el destino de los demás y capacidad para hacerlo! Sofía no podía tal vez definir los sentimientos que la embargaban, pero era consciente de cuál era su tendencia. La hacían mucho mayor de lo que era. La hacían tan mayor que, en una especie de momentáneo éxtasis de perspicacia, se sintió más vieja que su propio padre.

—Serás una buena chica —dijo éste—. Estoy seguro.

Era demasiado doloroso. Lo grotesco de la complacencia mostrada por su padre humilló el anterior comportamiento de Sofía. Se sintió humillada, no por ella sino por él. ¡Criatura singular! Salió corriendo de la habitación.

Afortunadamente pasaba Constanza por el corredor; de otro modo Sofía se hubiera sentido culpable de una gran infracción de su deber.

—Ve con papá —le susurró histéricamente, y huyó escaleras arriba hacia el segundo piso.

IV

A la hora de cenar, con los ojos bajos y enrojecidos, había vuelto a la simple ingenuidad infantil, intimidada por su madre. La comida tenía un aspecto inusual. Al señor Povey, que había vuelto sano y salvo del dentista pero había perdido dos muelas en dos días, se le alimentaba con «bazofia»: a saber, pan y leche; estaba sentado cerca de la chimenea. Los demás comían cerdo y media empanada fría de manzana y queso, pero Sofía sólo hacía como si comiera; cada vez que intentaba tragar, las lágrimas acudían a sus ojos y la garganta se le cerraba. La señora Baines y Constanza ponían demasiado cuidado en que pareciera que comían como todos los días. Los bonitos rizos de la señora Baines dominaban la mesa bajo la luz de gas.

—No estoy muy satisfecha hoy con mi empanada —dijo la señora Baines, masticando críticamente un trozo de corteza.

Hizo sonar una pequeña campanilla. Vino Maggie de la cueva. Llevaba un sencillo delantal blanco sin pechera pero iba sin cofia.

—Maggie, ¿quieres empanada?

—Sí, señora, si sobra...

Ésta era la respuesta habitual de Maggie cuando se le ofrecía algo de comer.

—Siempre sobra, Maggie —repuso su ama, como de costumbre—. Sofía, si no vas a usar ese plato, dámelo.

Maggie desapareció con una generosa cantidad de empanada.

La señora Baines se dirigió entonces al señor Povey refiriéndose a su estado y en especial a la necesidad de tomar precauciones para no coger frío en la encía despojada. Era una mujer valerosa y decidida; desde el principio hasta el final se comportó como si no hubiera sucedido en la familia nada en absoluto, con excepción de la empanada y el señor Povey, que hubiese apartado a aquel día de la normalidad. Dio un beso a Constanza y a Sofía con la igualdad más exacta y las llamó «tesoros míos» cuando se fueron a dormir.

Constanza, excelente y amable corazón, trató de imitar la táctica de su madre mientras las muchachas se desnudaban en su habitación. Creyó que no podía hacer nada mejor que hacer caso omiso del deplorable estado de Sofía.

—El vestido nuevo de mamá ya está terminado; se lo va a poner el domingo —dijo insulsamente.

—¡Si dices una palabra más te saco los ojos! —Sofía se volvió hacia ella con feroz expresión y voz entrecortada, y después se puso a sollozar entrecortadamente. La amenaza no iba en serio, pero el expresarla le proporcionó alivio. Constanza, frente al hecho de que los zapatos de su madre eran demasiado grandes para ella, decidió conservar sus ojos.

Un buen rato después de apagar el gas sólo sacudían la cama sollozos espaciados y las dos yacían despiertas y en silencio.

—Me imagino que mamá y tú habréis estado hablando maravillosamente de mí hoy —estalló Sofía, para sorpresa de Constanza, con voz lacrimosa.

—No —dijo Constanza con dulzura— Mamá me lo dijo y nada más.

—¿Que te dijo el qué?

—Que querías ser maestra.

—¡Y voy a serlo! —dijo Sofía con acritud.

«No conoces a mamá», pensó Constanza, pero no hizo ningún comentario audible.

Hubo otro sonoro sollozo aislado. Y después, tal es el asombroso talento de la juventud, las dos se quedaron dormidas.

A la mañana siguiente, temprano, Sofía se asomó por la ventana a la Plaza. Era sábado y por toda ella se estaban levantando para el principal mercado de la semana pequeños puestos techados de lino amarillo. En aquellos bárbaros tiempos Bursley tenía un majestuoso edificio, negro como el basalto, para la venta, por patas y chuletas, de animales muertos —se le conocía como «el Matadero»—, pero la verdura, la fruta, el queso, los huevos y los bollos se vendían aún bajo toldo. Los huevos se ofrecen ahora a cinco perras la unidad en un palacio que costó veinticinco mil libras. Sin embargo, se encontrará en Bursley gente dispuesta a afirmar que las cosas ya no son lo que eran y que sobre todo ha desaparecido lo novelesco de la vida. Pero hasta que no desaparece no es novelesco. Para Sofía, aunque se hallaba en un estado de ánimo que por lo general estimula el sentimiento de lo romántico, no había nada que lo fuese en aquel pintoresco campo entoldado. No era más que el mercado. El establecimiento de Holl, la principal tienda de ultramarinos, estaba abierto ya, en el extremo de la Plaza, y un aprendiz barría la acera de delante de él. Estaban abiertas las tabernas, varias de ellas especializadas en servir ron caliente a las cinco y media de la mañana. El pregonero de la villa, con su chaqueta azul de vistas rojas, cruzó la Plaza portando su gran campana por el badajo. En una de las cortinas de la ventana de la señora Povey (la de la confitería) seguía estando el sorprendente agujero de siempre, un agujero que ni siquiera su reciente alumbramiento podía apenas excusar. En tales cosas reparó Sofía con sus ojos escocidos y sin brillo.

—¡Sofía, querida, vas a coger una pulmonía si sigues ahí!

La joven dio un salto. La voz era la de su madre. Aquella vigorosa mujer, tras una noche tranquila junto al paralítico, estaba ya levantada y pulcramente vestida. Llevaba una botella, una huevera y una pequeña cantidad de mermelada en un cucharón.

—¡Métete en la cama, venga! Estás tiritando.

Sofía, pálida, obedeció. Era verdad; estaba tiritando. Constanza se despertó. La señora Baines fue al tocador y vertió en la huevera el contenido de la botella.

—¿Para quién es eso, mamá? —inquirió somnolienta Constanza.

—Es para Sofía —dijo la señora Baines con animación—. ¡Vamos, Sofía! —y avanzó con la huevera en una mano y el cucharón en la otra.

—¿Qué es eso, mamá? —preguntó Sofía, que sabía muy bien lo que era.

—Aceite de ricino, hija mía —dijo la señora Baines con amabilidad.

La ridiculez de pretender curar la obstinación y los anhelos de una vida más libre con aceite de ricino es quizá más aparente que real. La extraña dependencia mutua de cuerpo y espíritu, aunque sólo comprendida de manera inteligente en estos inteligentes tiempos, era sospechada por unas sensatas madres medievales. E indudablemente, en la época en la que la señora Baines representaba la modernidad, el aceite de ricino seguía siendo el remedio de remedios. Había suplantado a los vejigatorios. Y, si bien parte de su predicamento se debía a que era extremadamente desagradable, al menos había demostrado sus cualidades en muchas contiendas con la enfermedad. Menos de dos años antes, el viejo doctor Harrop (el padre del que le habló a la señora Baines de la señora Povey), que tenía a la sazón ochenta y seis años, se había caído desde lo alto de la escalera. Se levantó como pudo, se tomó inmediatamente una dosis de aceite de ricino y por la mañana estaba tan bien como si nunca hubiese visto una escalera. Este episodio era propiedad de la villa y había calado hondo en todos los corazones.

—No quiero, mamá —dijo Sofía con abatimiento—. Me encuentro perfectamente.

—Ayer no comiste nada en todo el día —dijo la señora Baines.

Y añadió—: ¡Vamos! —como si dijera: «Siempre todo este jaleo con el aceite de ricino. No me tengas esperando».

—Es que no quiero —repuso Sofía irritada y mordaz.

Las dos muchachas estaban tendidas de espaldas, una al lado de otra. Parecían muy delgadas y frágiles en comparación con la solidez de su madre. Constanza, prudentemente, guardó silencio.

La señora Baines apretó los labios, cosa que quería decir: «Esto me está empezando a aburrir. ¡Voy a tener que enfadarme de un momento a otro!».

—¡Vamos! —conminó de nuevo.

Las muchachas la oían dar golpecitos en el suelo con el pie.

—De verdad que no lo quiero, mamá —luchó Sofía—. ¡Supongo que sabré cuándo me hace falta y cuándo no! —Aquello era insolencia.

—Sofía, ¿te vas a tomar la medicina o no?

En los conflictos con sus hijas, el ultimátum materno siempre revestía una fórmula que contuviera esta frase. Las jóvenes sabían que, cuando las cosas llegaban al punto del «¿o no?», emitido en el tono más firme de la señora Baines, para ellas se había terminado. El ultimátum nunca había fallado.

Hubo un silencio.

—Y te agradeceré que cuides tus modales —añadió la señora Baines.

—No me lo tomaré —dijo Sofía hosca y rotundamente, y escondió la cara en la almohada.

Fue un momento histórico en la vida de la familia. La señora Baines creyó ver llegado el último día. Pero mantuvo su dignidad mientras el apocalipsis rugía en sus oídos.

—Por supuesto, no puedo obligarte a tomarlo —replicó con soberbia serenidad, ocultando la ira con una compasiva aflicción—. Eres una chica mayor y una chica traviesa. Y si quieres estar enferma, allá tú.

Tras admitir este tremendo hecho, la señora Baines se marchó.

Constanza temblaba.

No acabó ahí la cosa. A media mañana, cuando la señora Baines estaba pagando unas patatas nuevas en un puesto, en el extremo de arriba de la Plaza, y Constanza eligiendo tres peniques de flores en el mismo puesto, ¿a quién vieron, cruzando sola la esquina del banco, sino a Sofía Baines? La Plaza estaba llena de gente y de bullicio y sólo se veía a Sofía detrás de un primer plano de figuras que se movían y charlaban. Pero no había duda de que era ella. Había salido de la Plaza y estaba de regreso. Constanza apenas podía dar crédito a sus ojos. A la señora Baines le dio un vuelco el corazón. Pues hay que decir que las muchachas nunca y en ninguna circunstancia salían sin permiso, y casi nunca solas. Que Sofía anduviera suelta por la ciudad, sin permiso, sin que nadie lo supiera, exactamente como si fuese dueña de sí misma, era una idea que un día antes hubiera sido inconcebible. ¡Sin embargo allí estaba, moviéndose con una tranquilidad que habría que describir como desfachatez!

Enrojeciendo de aprensión, Constanza se preguntó qué iba a ocurrir. La señora Baines no dijo nada de sus sentimientos, ni siquiera indicó que hubiera visto aquel increíble y escandaloso espectáculo. Y bajaron por la Plaza cargadas con la parte más liviana de las compras que habían hecho durante una hora. Entraron en casa por la puerta de King Street y lo primero que oyeron fue el piano, arriba. No ocurrió nada. El señor Povey comió solo; luego se puso la mesa para ellas, sonó la campanilla y Sofía bajó con todo descaro para reunirse con su madre y su hermana. Y no ocurrió nada. Comieron en silencio; cuando Constanza acababa de dar gracias a Dios, Sofía se levantó bruscamente para irse.

—¡Sofía!

—Sí, mamá.

—Constanza, quédate donde estás —dijo la señora Baines de improviso a Constanza, que había hecho ademán de huir. Constanza se vio por tanto obligada a estar presente en la función, sin duda para hacer hincapié en su importancia y seriedad.

—Sofía —volvió a dirigirse la señora Baines a su hija menor con voz que no presagiaba nada bueno—. No, por favor, cierra la puerta. No hay ninguna razón para que se entere todo el mundo en la casa. ¡Entra ahora mismo en la habitación! Bien. Ahora, ¿qué estabas haciendo por la calle esta mañana?

Sofía jugueteaba nerviosamente con el borde de su delantalito negro y atormentaba una costura de la alfombra con la punta del pie. Inclinó la cabeza sobre el hombro izquierdo, al principio con una vaga sonrisa. No dijo nada, pero hablaba cada uno de sus miembros, cada mirada, cada curva. La señora Baines se acomodó con firmeza en su mecedora, invadida por la sensación de que tenía a Sofía, por así decirlo, retorciéndose en el extremo de un asador. Constanza se sentía presa de una angustia paralizante.

—¡Quiero una respuesta! —prosiguió la señora Baines—¿Qué estabas haciendo por la calle esta mañana?

—Salí y ya está —contestó Sofía tras una pausa, todavía con los ojos bajos y en tono bastante apagado.

—¿Por qué saliste? No me dijiste que fueras a salir. Oí que Constanza te preguntaba si venías al mercado con nosotras y le dijiste, con mucha descortesía, que no.

—No se lo dije con descortesía —objetó Sofía.

—Sí que lo hiciste. Y te agradeceré que no me contestes.

—No pretendía hablarte de manera descortés, ¿verdad, Constanza? —La cabeza de Sofía se volvió vivamente hacia su hermana. Constanza no sabía adonde mirar.

—No me contestes —repitió la señora Baines con severidad— Y no trates de meter en esto a Constanza, porque no pienso tolerarlo.

—¡Oh, por supuesto Constanza siempre tiene razón! —observó Sofía con una ironía cuyo descaro sin

precedentes conmocionó a la señora Baines hasta sus macizos fundamentos.

—¿Quieres que te dé una bofetada, niña?

Su paciencia había llegado al límite y se veían sus rizos vibrando bajo la provocación de la insolente Sofía. Entonces el labio inferior de la muchacha empezó a temblar y todos los músculos de su cara parecieron aflojarse.

—Eres una chica muy mala —dijo la señora Baines conteniéndose. «Ya la tengo», dijo para sí. «No hace falta que dé rienda suelta a mi temperamento».

Y Sofía dejó escapar un sollozo. Se comportaba como una niña. No había en ella ni rastro de la joven doncella que cruzaba sosegadamente la Plaza sin permiso ni compañía.

«Sabía que se iba a echar a llorar», se dijo la señora Baines, respirando aliviada.

—Estoy esperando —profirió en voz alta.

Otro sollozo. La señora Baines se fabricó más paciencia para estar a la altura de las exigencias.

—Me dices que no te conteste y luego dices que estás esperando —balbuceó sordamente Sofía.

—¿Qué dices? ¿Cómo voy a saber lo que dices si hablas así? —Pero la señora Baines no lo había oído por discreción, que es mejor que el valor.

—No tiene importancia —espetó Sofía en un sollozo. Ahora lloraba; las lágrimas rebotaban de sus hermosas mejillas carmesí a la alfombra. Le temblaba todo el cuerpo.

—No seas como un bebé grande —le encareció la señora Baines, con un toque de áspera persuasión en la voz.

—Eres tu la que me hace llorar —dijo acerbamente Sofía—. ¡Me haces llorar y luego dices que soy un bebé grande! Y los sollozos sacudieron su cuerpo como olas que se suceden. Hablaba de manera tan poco clara que a su madre le costaba ahora de verdad entender sus palabras.

—Sofía —dijo con la calma de una diosa—: no soy yo quien te hace llorar. Es tu conciencia culpable la que te hace llorar. Yo sólo te he hecho una pregunta y pretendo obtener una respuesta.

—Ya te lo he dicho. —Aquí Sofía contuvo sus sollozos haciendo un inmenso esfuerzo.

—¿Qué me has dicho?

—Que salí y ya está.

—No toleraré más tonterías —dijo la señora Baines—. ¿Para qué saliste, y sin decírmelo? Si me lo hubieras dicho después, cuando volví, *motu proprio,* las cosas podrían haber sido diferentes. ¡Pero no, ni una palabra! ¡Soy yo quien tiene que preguntar! ¡Vamos, deprisa! No puedo esperar más.

«Cedí cuando el aceite de ricino, muchacha», dijo en su fuero interno la señora Baines. «¡Pero otra vez no! ¡Otra vez no!».

—No lo sé —murmuró Sofía.

—¿Qué quieres decir, que no lo sabes?

Volvieron tempestuosamente los sollozos.

—Quiero decir que no lo sé. Salí y ya está. —Su voz se elevó; se oía mucho pero apenas se entendía—, Y si salí ¿qué?

—Sofía, no voy a consentir que me hables de esa manera. Si te crees que porque vas a dejar el colegio puedes hacer lo que te dé la gana...

—¿Es que quiero yo dejar el colegio? —chilló Sofía dando una patada en el suelo. En un momento la abrumó una oleada de emoción, como si el dar una patada en el suelo hubiera liberado los demonios de la tempestad. Una pasión incontrolable transfiguró su rostro.

—¡Todos queréis hacerme desgraciada! —gritó con terrible violencia—, ¡Y ahora no puedo ni salir! ¡Eres una mujer horrorosa y cruel y te odio! ¡Y puedes hacer lo que quieras! ¡Méteme en la cárcel si quieres! ¡Sé que te alegrarías si me muriera!

Salió precipitadamente de la habitación, dando un portazo que hizo temblar la casa. Y sus gritos se podían haber oído en la tienda *y* hasta en la cocina. Fue una experiencia sorprendente para la señora Baines. Señora Baines, ¿por qué quiso usted cargar con un testigo? ¿Por qué dijo de forma tan categórica que quería una respuesta?

—¡De verdad —tartamudeó, echándose la dignidad sobre los hombros como si fuese una prenda que el viento le hubiera arrebatado—, nunca me hubiera imaginado que esa pobre chica tuviera un genio tan espantoso! ¡Qué lástima me da! —fue lo mejor que pudo decir.

Constanza, que no podía soportar ser testigo de la humillación de su madre, desapareció calladamente de la habitación. Llegó a la mitad de la escalera del segundo piso y después, al oír unos regulares y dolorosos sollozos, vaciló y se deslizó de nuevo abajo.

Era la primera y costosa experiencia que tenía la señora Baines de la ingratitud de los hijos por haber sido traídos al mundo. La despojó de su profunda y absoluta fe en sí misma. Había creído que en su casa lo sabía todo y podía hacer todo. Y, ¡quién lo iba a decir!, había tropezado de repente con una personalidad insospechada en su casa, una especie de objeto de duro mármol que la informaba a golpes de que si no quería que le hiciese daño tenía que apartarse de su camino.

V

El domingo por la tarde estaba la señora Baines tratando de descansar un poco en el salón, donde había mandado encender el fuego. Constanza estaba en el dormitorio contiguo con su padre. Sofía yacía entre mantas en el cuarto de arriba con un resfriado febril. Aquel resfriado y su vestido nuevo eran el único consuelo de la señora Baines en aquel momento. Había profetizado que Sofía pillaría un resfriado por negarse a tomar el aceite de ricino y así había sucedido. Por estar en camisón junto a una ventana con corrientes una mañana de mayo, Sofía había recibido lo que la señora Baines denominaba «una bofetada de la naturaleza». En cuanto al vestido, había ido a la iglesia con él y había rezado por Sofía con él antes de comer; y las cuatro dobles filas de ribetes de la falda habían tenido gran éxito. Con su manteleta con puntilla alrededor y su gorrito bajo y adornado con sartas de cuentas había dado un brillo único a la congregación en la iglesia. Era gruesa, pero las modas, que prescribían vagos perfiles, amplias caídas hacia abajo y vastas amplitudes, la favorecían. No hay que suponer que las mujeres gruesas de cierta edad traten jamás de seducir la vista y perturbar las meditaciones del hombre con otros encantos que los morales. La señora Baines sabía que era guapa, refinada, imponente y elegante, y el saberlo le producía un verdadero placer. Se miraba en el espejo por encima del hombro con tanta ansiedad como una jovencita: no se confundan ustedes.

No descansaba; no podía. Estaba sentada pensando, en la misma postura que Sofía dos tardes antes. Le habría sorprendido saber que su actitud, porte y expresión recordaban mucho a los de su reprensible hija. Pero así era. Un ángel bueno la hizo sentirse inquieta; se acercó ociosamente a la ventana y miró hacia la Plaza, desierta y con los puestos cerrados. También ella, una majestuosa matrona, sentía extraños y breves anhelos de una existencia más romántica que la suya, cometas con cola que cruzaban el firmamento de su espíritu, blandas e inexplicables melancolías. El ángel bueno, apartándola de aquel estado de ánimo, dirigió su mirada a un determinado punto de lo alto de la Plaza.

Al momento salió de la estancia, no tanto como con prisa pero sí sin perder tiempo. En un rincón bajo la escalera, al lado de la puerta, había una caja, cuyas dimensiones eran de un pie por uno y dieciocho pulgadas de fondo, cubierta de hule negro. Se inclinó y abrió la caja, que estaba acolchada por dentro y contenía el servicio de té de plata de los Baines. Sacó la tetera, el Azucarero, la jarra de la leche, las pinzas del azúcar, la jarra del agua caliente y la bandeja de los pasteles (un plato plano con un agarradero semicircular), piezas cinceladas, de plata por dentro y de plata dorada por fuera, brillantes reliquias que centelleaban en el oscuro rincón como el secreto orgullo de las familias respetables. Las colocó en una bandeja que estaba siempre en el fondo de aquel rincón. Después miró hacia arriba a través de los balaustres, hacia el segundo piso.

—¡Maggie! —siseó con voz penetrante.

—Sí, señora —se oyó una voz.

—¿Estás vestida?

—Sí, señora. Ya bajo.

—Venga, ponte la muselina. —Quería decir «delantal».

Maggie comprendió.

—Lleva esto para el té —dijo la señora Baines a Maggie cuando ésta bajó—. Mejor restriégalo primero. Ya sabes donde está el pastel, el nuevo. Las mejores tazas. Y las cucharillas de plata.

Ambas oyeron llamar a la puerta lateral, muy lejos, abajo.

—¡Ya viene! —exclamó la señora Baines—. Ahora llévate todo esto abajo, a la cocina, antes de abrir.

—Sí, señora —dijo Maggie, y se marchó.

La señora Baines llevaba un delantal de alpaca negro. Se lo quitó y se puso otro de satén negro bordado con flores amarillas que había sacado de la cómoda sólo metiendo el brazo en su dormitorio.

Volvió Maggie casi sin aliento, acompañando a la visitante.

—¡Ah, señorita Chetwynd! —se levantó para recibirla—. Me alegro mucho de verla. La vi bajar por la Plaza y me dije: «Caramba, espero que la señorita Chetwynd no vaya a olvidarse de nosotros».

La señorita Chetwynd, después de sonreír un momento forzadamente, avanzó con ese aire afectado y un poco histriónico que es uno de los castigos de la pedagogía. Vivía bajo la mirada de sus alumnas. Su vida era un solo e incesante esfuerzo por evitar el hacer nada que pudiera influir para mal en quienes estaban a su cuidado o herir la sensibilidad natural de sus padres. Tenía que seguir su camino terrenal por un bosque de sensibilidades extremadamente delicadas, frondas de helecho que invadían el camino y a las que ella no debía ni siquiera rozar sin querer con la falda al pasar. ¡No es de sorprender que caminara con pasos menudos! ¡No es de sorprender que tuviera costumbre de pegar los codos a los costados y recogerse bien el abrigo por la calle! Su folleto hablaba de «un sólido y religioso curso de formación», «un estudio que abarca las habituales ramas de lengua, junto con la música, impartida por un pastor de talento, dibujo, baile y calistenia». Además «labores de aguja simple y ornamental» e «influencia moral», para concluir con su natural, «que es muy mesurado; todos los detalles, con referencias a los padres y demás, se proporcionan al hacerse la solicitud». (A veces también sin solicitud.) Como ilustración de la delicadeza de esas frondas de helecho, ¡esa sola palabra, «baile», casi la había hecho perder a Constanza y a Sofía siete años antes!

Era una doncella cuarentona de cara fosca y no «bien situada»; en su familia el don del éxito lo había monopolizado su hermana mayor. Por estas características, la señora Baines, una matrona en buena posición, compadecía a la señorita Chetwynd. Por otra parte, ésta podía elegir el terreno desde el que mirar por encima del hombro a la señora Baines, que al fin y al cabo se dedicaba al comercio. La señorita Chetwynd no tenía ni rastro de acento local; hablaba con un refinamiento meridional que las Cinco Ciudades, aun burlándose de él, envidiaban. Todas sus oes tenían una leve tendencia a convertirse en *ow* igual que el ritualismo tiende al Catolicismo. Y era un dechado de etiqueta, un milagro de corrección; a los ojos de los padres de sus alumnas no era tanto «una perfecta señora» como «una señora perfecta». De modo que era una cuestión sutil si la señora Baines trataba con secreta condescendencia a la señorita Chetwynd o a la inversa. Quizá ganaba la batalla la señora Baines por estar casada.

La señorita Chetwynd, sentada con esmero y precisión, inició la conversación explicando que aunque la señora Baines no le hubiera escrito la habría ido a ver de todos modos, ya que tenía el hábito de visitar las casas de sus discípulas durante las vacaciones, lo cual era cierto. Hay que decir que la señora Baines había enviado el viernes a la señorita Chetwynd una de sus notas más lujosas —en papel color lavanda con bordes festoneados, la moda más selecta de entonces— para anunciarle con su letra italiana que Constanza y Sofía iban a abandonar la escuela al final del siguiente cuatrimestre, dando razones por cuanto atañe a Sofía.

Antes de que la visitante hubiera llegado muy lejos entró Maggie con una caja de té lacada y, en una bandeja lacada, la tetera de plata y una cuchara de plata. La señora Baines, sin dejar de hablar, tomó una llave de su manojo, abrió la caja de té, echó cuatro cucharadas en la tetera y volvió a cerrar la caja con llave.

—Fresa —dijo misteriosamente a Maggie; ésta desapareció llevándose la bandeja y su contenido.

—Y ¿cómo está su hermana? Ya hace mucho desde que estuvo aquí —prosiguió la señora Baines dirigiéndose a la señorita Chetwynd después de murmurar «fresa».

La observación no tenía otro objeto que la mera cortesía, pues la anfitriona no acababa de decidirse a abordar el tema de sus hijas, pero resultó ajustarse al propósito social de la señorita Chetwynd al milímetro. La señorita Chetwynd era una vasija que rebosaba acontecimientos. Su rostro fulguraba de orgullo cuando añadió:

—Claro está que ahora todo ha cambiado.

—¿Sí? —murmuró la señora Baines con curiosidad cortés.

—Sí —repuso la señorita Chetwynd—¿No se ha enterado?

—No —dijo la señora Baines. La señorita Chetwynd vio que no se había enterado.

—Del compromiso de Elizabeth. Con el reverendo Archibald Jones.

Lo cierto es que la señora Baines se quedó de una pieza. No hizo nada indiscreto; no dejó traslucir su excusable sorpresa porque la mayor de las señoritas Chetwynd estuviera comprometida con alguien, fuese quien fuese, como habrían hecho algunas mujeres sometidas a la tensión del momento. Conservó su presencia de ánimo.

—¡De veras que es muy interesante! —exclamó.

Lo era, pues Archibald Jones era uno de los ídolos del Enlace Metodista Wesleyano y un orador famoso en toda Inglaterra. En «aniversarios» y «sermones de confianza» probablemente no tenía rival. Su nombre de pila le ayudaba; era un bocado exquisito y sonoro para sus admiradores. No era un ministro itinerante; emigraba cada tres años. Su función era dirigir los asuntos de la «Sala del Libro», el departamento de publicaciones del Enlace. Vivía en Londres y hacía rápidas salidas a las provincias los fines de semana; predicaba los domingos y daba una conferencia, teñida de saber libresco, «en la capilla» los lunes por la tarde. En todas las ciudades que visitaba había competencia por el privilegio de ofrecerle distracciones. Poseía celo, energía infatigable y un ingenio jovial. Era un viudo de cincuenta años; su mujer había muerto hacía veinte. Parecía como si las mujeres no estuvieran hechas para tan brillante astro. ¡Y hete aquí que lo había atrapado Elizabeth Chetwynd, que se había ido de las Cinco Ciudades hacía un cuarto de siglo, a los veinte años! Austera, bigotuda, formidable, reseca, sin duda lo había logrado con su poderoso intelecto. ¡Sin duda era una unión de intelectos! A él le había impresionado el de ella y a ella el de él, y entonces sus intelectos se habían besado. En el transcurso de una semana, cincuenta mil mujeres de cuarenta condados se habían imaginado ese ósculo de intelectos, se habían encogido de hombros y habían decidido una vez más que no hay quien entienda a los hombres. ¡Esos grandes de Londres, enamorándose como los demás! ¡Pero no! El amor era una palabra voluptuosa y procaz que no se podía usar en un asunto como aquél. En general se pensaba que el reverendo Archibald Jones y la mayor de las señoritas Chetwynd elevarían el matrimonio a lo que se podría denominar un plano astral.

Después de que se hubo servido el té, la señora Baines fue recuperando poco a poco su posición tanto en su estimación privada como en la deferencia de la señorita Aliñe Chetwynd.

«Sí —se dijo—. Puede usted hablar de su hermana y puede referirse a él llamándolo “Archibald”, y puede hablar con finura. Pero ¿tiene usted un servicio de té como éste? ¿Se puede usted imaginar una mermelada de fresa mas perfecta que ésta? ¿No ha costado mi vestido más de lo que usted gasta en ropa en un año? ¿La ha mirado un hombre alguna vez? Al fin y al cabo ¿no hay algo en mi posición..., en suma, algo...?».

No dijo esto en voz alta. En modo alguno se apartó de la escrupulosa cortesía de una anfitriona. No hubo nada ni siquiera en su tono que indicara que la señora Baines era un personaje. Sin embargo, a la señorita Chetwynd se le ocurrió de repente que el orgullo por ser la futura cuñada del reverendo Archibald Jones estaría mejor guardado en su bolsillo por un rato. Y preguntó por el señor Baines. Después, la conversación renqueó un poco.

—Me figuro que mi carta no la habrá sorprendido —dijo la señora Baines.

—Me sorprendió y no me sorprendió —contestó la señorita Chetwynd, en su estilo profesional y no en el de una futura cuñada—. Desde luego, es natural que sienta perder a dos alumnas tan buenas, pero no podemos retener para siempre a nuestros alumnos. —Sonrió; no carecía de fortaleza: es más fácil perder alumnos que reemplazarlos— No obstante —una pausa—, lo que dice usted de Sofía es totalmente cierto, totalmente. Está tan adelantada como Constanza. No obstante —otra pausa y hablando más deprisa—, Sofía

no es en modo alguno una chica corriente.

—Espero que no le haya causado muchos problemas.

—¡Oh, no! —exclamó la señorita Chetwynd—, Sofía y yo nos llevamos muy bien. Yo siempre he tratado de apelar a su razón. Nunca la he obligado... No, con algunas muchachas... En cierto modo considero a Sofía la muchacha más notable, no la alumna, pero sí..., ¿cómo lo diría?..., la individualidad más notable que he conocido nunca. —Y su actitud añadió: «Y fíjese usted, esto es algo... ¡tratándose de mí!».

—¡Claro, claro! —dijo la señora Baines. Se dijo: «Yo no soy una de estas madres vulgares y tontas que conoce usted. Veo a mis hijas con imparcialidad. No se me puede halagar en lo tocante a ellas».

Sin embargo estaba halagada; en su mente tomó forma la idea de que realmente Sofía no era una chica corriente.

—Me imagino que le habrá dicho que quiere ser maestra —observó la señorita Chetwynd, cogiendo un poco de la incomparable mermelada.

Sostenía la cuchara con el pulgar y tres dedos. El meñique, en materia de menesteres honestos, jamás se asociaba con los demás dedos: delicadamente curvado, se apartaba siempre de ellos cuanto podía.

—¿Se lo ha mencionado a usted? —preguntó la señora Baines, sobresaltada.

—¡Oh, sí! Varias veces. Sofía es una muchacha muy reservada, mucho..., pero creo poder decir que siempre he gozado de su confianza. Ha habido veces en las que Sofía y yo hemos estado muy próximas la una a la otra. Elizabeth estaba muy impresionada con ella. Hasta le puedo decir que en una de sus últimas cartas se refirió a Sofía y me dijo que le había hablado de ella al señor Jones, y que el señor Jones la recordaba perfectamente.

¡Era imposible que una madre, hasta la más sabia y poco común, dejase de verse afectada por semejante anuncio!

—Me imagino que su hermana dejará ahora su colegio —comentó la señora Baines para distraer la atención de su incomodidad.

—¡Oh, no! —Y esta vez la señora Baines había escandalizado de verdad a la señorita Chetwynd—. No hay nada que pudiera inducir a Elizabeth a abandonar la causa de la educación. Archibald se toma un interés enorme en el colegio. ¡Oh, no! ¡Por nada del mundo!

—Entonces, ¿cree usted que Sofía sería una buena maestra? —interrogó la señora Baines de manera aparentemente intranscendente y sonriendo. Pero las palabras marcaron una época en su mente. Todo había terminado.

—Creo que está firmemente decidida y...

—Eso no nos afectaría ni a su padre ni a mí —interrumpió la señora Baines rápidamente.

—¡Claro que no! Sólo digo que está firmemente decidida. Sí, en cualquier caso sería una maestra superior a la media. —«¡Esa chica le ha ganado la batalla a su madre sin mi!», reflexionó—, ¡Ah! ¡Aquí está la encantadora Constanza!

Constanza, para quien los ruidos de la visita y el coloquio habían supuesto una tentación irresistible, había entrado silenciosamente en la estancia.

—He dejado las dos puertas abiertas, mamá —se excusó por dejar solo a su padre, y dio un beso a la señorita Chetwynd.

Se ruborizó, pero muy contenta, y verdaderamente hizo un muy encomiable *debut* como damisela. Su madre la recompensó haciéndola participar en la conversación. Y pronto se hizo historia.

Así entró Sofía de aprendiza con la señorita Aliñe Chetwynd. La señora Baines se comportó con grandeza. Era la señorita Chetwynd quien la había apremiado a ello, y su respeto por la señorita Chetwynd... Además el reverendo Jones, en cierto modo, había intervenido en el asunto... ¡Por supuesto, la idea de que Sofía fuera a irse a Londres era absurda, absurda! (La señora Baines abrigaba el secreto temor de que lo absurdo pudiese acontecer, pero, estando allí el reverendo Jones, podía hacerse frente a lo peor.) Sofía tenía que comprender que incluso el aprendizaje en Bursley no era más que una prueba. Ya se vería cómo iban las

cosas. Tenía que dar las gracias a la señorita Chetwynd...

—Hice que viniera la señorita Chetwynd a hablar con mamá —dijo una noche Sofía, pomposamente, a la sencilla Constanza, como queriendo decir: «Esa señorita Chetwynd come en mi mano».

Para Constanza, ya la misma empresa de Sofía era tan asombrosa como su éxito. ¡Hay que imaginarla saliendo aquel sábado por la mañana, después de la rotunda decisión de su madre, para conseguir el apoyo de la señorita Chetwynd!

No hace falta insistir en la trágica grandeza de la renuncia de la señora Baines, una renuncia que suponía su aceptación de un cambio en el equilibrio de poder de su reino. Parte de su tragedia consistía en que nadie, ni siquiera Constanza, podía adivinar la intensidad de su sufrimiento. No tenía ningún confidente; era incapaz de mostrar una herida. Pero cuando yacía despierta por la noche al lado del organismo que antaño fuera su esposo, meditaba larga y profundamente sobre el martirio de su vida. ¿Qué había hecho ella para merecerlo? Siempre se había esforzado conscientemente por ser amable, justa, paciente. Y sabía que era sagaz y prudente. En las terribles e insospechadas pruebas de su vida matrimonial, ¡bien podía habérsele otorgado un consuelo como madre! Pero no; no había sido así. Y sentía toda la amargura de la edad enfrentada a la juventud: una juventud egoísta, dura, cruel, inflexible; ¡una juventud tan burda, tan ignorante de la vida, tan lenta en comprender! Tenía a Constanza, sí, pero pasarían veinte años antes de que Constanza fuera capaz de apreciar el sacrificio de juicio y de orgullo que había hecho su madre al tomar su repentina decisión en el transcurso de aquella conversación divagatoria, ceremoniosa y afectada con la señorita Chetwynd. ¡Tal vez Constanza pensara que había cedido al temperamento apasionado de Sofía! Era imposible explicar a Constanza que no había cedido sino al hecho de darse cuenta de la total incapacidad de Sofía para prestar oídos a la razón y a la sabiduría. ¡Ah! En ocasiones, tendida en la oscuridad, se sacaba imaginariamente el corazón del pecho y lo arrojaba ante Sofía, sangrante, y clamaba: «¡Mira lo que cargo por tu culpa!». Luego lo recogía y lo volvía a esconder, y endulzaba su amargura con sabias admoniciones dirigidas a sí misma.

Y todo ello porque Sofía, sabiendo que si se quedaba en casa se vería obligada a ayudar en la tienda, optaba por una actividad honrosa que la alejaba del peligro. ¡Corazón, qué absurdo es que sangres!

Capitulo IV

EL ELEFANTE

I

—Sofía, ¿quieres venir a ver al elefante? ¡Ven! —Constanza entró en el salón con esta ansiosa petición.

—No —replicó Sofía con un deje de condescendencia—. ¡Estoy demasiado ocupada para pensar en elefantes!

Sólo habían pasado dos años, pero las dos muchachas eran ya mayores; manga larga, falda larga, cabello recogido y un porte enormemente serio, como si la existencia fuera aterradora con sus responsabilidades; sin embargo, a veces la infancia atravesaba la corteza de la gravedad, como en aquel momento Constanza, entusiasmada con elefantes y cosas así, y proclamaba con vivaces gestos que al fin y al cabo no había muerto del todo. Las dos hermanas eran visiblemente distintas. Constanza llevaba el delantal de alpaca negra y las tijeras al extremo de un largo elástico negro que indicaban su vocación por la tienda. Estaba resultando ser un considerable éxito en el departamento de sombreros de señora. Había aprendido a hablar con la gente y era, dentro de su modestia, muy dueña de sí misma. Había engordado un poco. A todo el mundo le agradaba. Sofía se había convertido en estudiante. El paso del tiempo había acentuado su reserva. Su única amiga era la señorita Chetwynd, a quien la unía, teniendo en cuenta la disparidad de edades, una gran intimidad. En casa hablaba poco. Carecía de afabilidad; era, como decía su madre, «susceptible». Exigía diplomacia a los demás, pero no pagaba con la misma moneda. Su actitud era incluso de un desdén semiescondido, unas veces amable y otras fría y acerba. No llevaba delantal, en una época en la que los delantales eran casi esenciales para el decoro. ¡No! Ella no quería llevar delantal y se acabó. No era tan pulcra como Constanza y, si las manos de Constanza habían adquirido la tosca textura que trae el comercio con sus agujas, alfileres, flores artificiales y telas, las finas manos de Sofía estaban pocas veces libres de tinta. Pero Sofía era de una hermosura espléndida. Y hasta su madre y Constanza tenían la idea instintiva de que su rostro constituía en cualquier caso una excusa parcial para su aspereza.

—Bueno —dijo Constanza—; si tú no vienes le preguntaré a mamá si quiere venir ella.

Sofía, inclinándose sobre sus libros, no respondió. Pero su coronilla dijo: «Eso no tiene para mí ningún interés».

Constanza salió de la habitación y al momento volvió con su madre.

—Sofía —dijo ésta en tono alegre y excitado—, podías ir un ratito con tu padre mientras Constanza y yo subimos un momento al terreno de juego a ver al elefante. Lo mismo te da trabajar allí. Tu padre está durmiendo.

—¡Oh, muy bien! —accedió altivamente Sofía—. ¿Cómo es posible armar tanto jaleo por un elefante? De todas maneras, tendré más tranquilidad en tu habitación. Aquí hay un ruido espantoso. —Echó un vistazo a la Plaza mientras se ponía en pie lánguidamente.

Era la mañana del tercer día de las Vísperas de Bursley, no las modernas, remilgadas y respetables, sino un carnaval orgiástico, grosero en todas sus manifestaciones de júbilo. Todo el centro de la ciudad estaba entregado a los furiosos placeres del pueblo. La mayor parte de la Plaza estaba ocupada por la colección de animales salvajes de Wombwell, en una amplia tienda alargada donde las enfurecidas bestias rugían y bramaban día y noche. Extendiéndose desde aquella suprema atracción, por la plaza del mercado, pasado el ayuntamiento y hasta el Alto del Pato[27] , la Plaza del Pato y la tierra baldía denominada «terreno de juegos», había cientos de casetas con banderas que exhibían todos los deleites de lo horrible. Era posible ver las atrocidades de la Revolución Francesa y de las Islas Fidji; los estragos de indescriptibles enfermedades; la carne viva de una hembra humana casi desnuda que, según se aseguraba, pesaba veintidós *stone*[28]*;* los esqueletos del misterioso fantoscopio[29], las sanguinarias competiciones de unos campeones desnudos de medio cuerpo arriba (con la oportunidad de recoger un diente rojo como recuerdo). Se podía probar la fuerza golpeando en el estómago a una imagen de otro ser humano, y la puntería arrancando las cabezas de otras imágenes con una bola de madera. También se podía disparar con rifle a diversos blancos. Todas las calles

estaban bordeadas de casetas llenas de cosas de comer formando montones, sobre todo pescado seco, entrañas de animales y pan de jengibre. Todas las tabernas estaban atestadas de gente; frenéticos y regocijados borrachos, hombres y mujeres, andaban embistiendo por las aceras para acá y para allá, profiriendo gritos que rivalizaban con las trompetas, cornos* y tambores de las casetas y con los estrepitosos juguetes que llevaban los niños.

Era un espectáculo espléndido, pero no un espectáculo para las familias principales. La escuela de la señorita Chetwynd estaba cerrada para que las hijas de las familias principales pudieran permanecer recluidas hasta que hubiera pasado lo peor. Los Baines se mantenían al margen de las vísperas por todos los medios imaginables, eligiendo esa semana para mostrar artículos de luto en el escaparate de la izquierda y negándose a dejar salir a Maggie bajo ningún pretexto. Por lo tanto, no es posible subestimar el deslumbrante éxito social del elefante que con tanta facilidad arrastraba a la señora Baines al torbellino.

La noche anterior, uno de los tres elefantes de Wombwell se había arrodillado de improviso encima de un hombre en la tienda; después salió de ella, eligió al azar a otro hombre de entre la multitud que estaba delante contemplando unas grandes pinturas y trató de metérselo en la boca. Detenido por su cuidador indio con una horca, dejó al hombre en el suelo y clavó el colmillo en una arteria del brazo de su víctima. A continuación, en medio de una excitación sin precedentes, dejó que se lo llevaran de allí. Fue conducido a la parte de atrás de la tienda, justo delante de las ventanas cerradas de los Baines, y obligado a arrodillarse utilizando estacas, poleas y cuerdas. Le enjalbegaron la cabeza y se encomendó a seis hombres del Cuerpo de Fusileros que le disparasen a una distancia de cinco yardas, mientras los agentes de policía mantenían alejada a la muchedumbre con sus porras. Murió al instante, cayendo al suelo con un ruido sordo. La multitud estalló en aclamaciones y los Voluntarios, embriagados de su propia importancia, lanzaron otras tres ráfagas contra el cadáver; luego se los llevaron como héroes a diferentes tabernas. El elefante, con la ayuda de sus dos compañeros, fue transportado a un vagón de ferrocarril y desapareció en la noche. Aquella era la mayor sensación que jamás había tenido ni quizá tendría lugar jamás en Bursley. La excitación por el rechazo de las Leyes del Trigo o por Inkman era poca cosa en comparación con la producida entonces. El señor Critchlow, a quien habían llamado para aplicar un apresurado torniquete al brazo de la segunda víctima, se había asomado después para contárselo todo a John Baines. El interés del señor Baines, sin embargo, había sido escaso. El señor Critchlow tuvo más éxito con las damas, que aunque habían visto los disparos desde el salón estaban ansiosas de conocer los detalles más nimios.

Al día siguiente se supo que el elefante yacía cerca del terreno de juego, en espera de la decisión del jefe de alguaciles y del oficial médico en cuanto a su entierro. Y todo el mundo tuvo que visitar el cadáver. No hubo superioridad social que pudiera resistir la seducción de aquel elefante muerto. Acudieron peregrinos de todas las Cinco Ciudades para verlo.

—Ya nos vamos —dijo la señora Baines luego de ponerse el gorrito y el chal.

—Muy bien —respondió Sofía, haciendo como si estuviera absorta en el estudio, sentada en el sofá que había a los pies de la cama de su padre.

Y Constanza, que asomó la cabeza al interior de la habitación desde la puerta, se llevó tras de sí a su madre como un imán.

Entonces Sofía oyó una interesante conversación en el pasillo.

—¿Van ustedes a ver el elefante, señora Baines? —preguntó la voz del señor Povey.

—Sí. ¿Por qué?

—Creo que sería mejor que fuera con ustedes. Seguro que hay muchos apretujones. —El tono del señor Povey era firme; tenía una posición.

—Pero ¿y la tienda?

—No tardaremos mucho —dijo el señor Povey.

—Oh, sí, mamá —añadió Constanza en tono de súplica.

Sofía sintió estremecerse la casa al cerrarse de golpe la puerta lateral. Se levantó de un salto y contempló cómo los tres cruzaban en diagonal King Street y se sumergían en las olas. ¡Aquella triple marcha era sin duda el tributo supremo al elefante muerto! Era sencillamente sorprendente. Hizo que Sofía se diera cuenta de que había calculado mal la importancia del elefante. Le hizo lamentar haberlo despreciado como atracción. La habían dejado atrás, y el gozo de vivir la llamaba. Veía las «Bóvedas» de la acera de enfrente,

llenas de trabajadores —alfareros y mineros— vestidos con sus mejores ropas, algunos con sombrero, que bebían, gesticulaban y reían en una hilera ante el largo mostrador.

Mientras estaba mirando por la ventana del dormitorio vio a un joven que subía por King Street seguido de un mozo de cuerda que avanzaba penosamente empujando una carretilla cargada de equipaje. Pasó lentamente por debajo de la misma ventana. Ella se sonrojó. Era evidente que la visión del joven la había sumido en una conmoción poco corriente. Contempló los libros, que estaban en el sofá, y después a su padre. El delgado y demacrado señor Baines, que inspiraba profunda piedad, seguía durmiendo. Su cerebro casi había cesado ya de estar activo; había que darle de comer y cuidar de él como si fuese un bebé barbudo y dormía durante horas de un tirón incluso de día. Sofía salió de la habitación. Al cabo de un momento entró corriendo en la tienda, sorprendiendo a las tres jóvenes dependientas. En la esquina junto a la ventana del lado de las modas se había formado un pequeño rincón aislando una parte del mostrador por medio de grandes cajas de flores puestas de pie. Aquel rincón se había dado en llamar «el rincón de la señorita Baines». Sofía se dirigió apresuradamente a él, deslizándose por detrás de una de las dependientas en el estrecho espacio que quedaba entre la parte de atrás del mostrador y la pared ocupada con estantes. Se sentó en la silla de Constanza y simuló estar buscando algo. Al salir de la habitación del enfermo se había examinado en el espejo de cuerpo entero del entresuelo. Cuando oyó una voz en la puerta de la tienda preguntando primero por el señor Povey y después por la señora Baines, se levantó y, echando mano del objeto que tenía más cerca, que casualmente fueron unas tijeras, se encaminó a toda prisa hacia la escalera del entresuelo como si las tijeras fuesen un santo grial apasionadamente buscado y que había que tener celosamente escondido. Quería detenerse y darse la vuelta, pero algo se lo impedía. Se hallaba en el extremo del mostrador, debajo de la escalera de caracol, cuando una de las dependientas dijo:

—¿No sabrá usted cuándo van a volver el señor Povey o su madre, señorita Sofía? Está aquí...

Fue un divino alivio para Sofía.

—Están..., yo... —tartamudeó, dándose la vuelta bruscamente. Por suerte seguía cobijada detrás del mostrador.

El joven al que había visto en la calle se adelantó osadamente.

—Buenos días, señorita Sofía —dijo, con el sombrero en la mano—. Hace mucho tiempo que tuve el placer de verla.

Ella nunca se había ruborizado como se ruborizó entonces. Apenas se daba cuenta de lo que hacía cuando regresó lentamente hacia el rincón de su hermana, con el joven siguiéndola por el lado de fuera del mostrador.

II

Sabía que era un viajante de Birkinshaws, la más renombrada y gigantesca de todas las casas de Manchester. Pero no sabía su nombre, que era Gerald Scales. Cuando entró en ella como representante era un hombre de unos treinta años, de estatura más bien baja pero muy bien proporcionado, de cabello rubio y aspecto distinguido. Su ancha y ajustada corbata, con el borde del cuello blanco asomando por encima, era especialmente elegante. Llevaba varios años de viajante de Birkinshaws, pero Sofía sólo lo había visto una vez con anterioridad, siendo una niña, tres años antes. Las relaciones entre los viajantes de las grandes casas y sus serios y seguros clientes de las poblaciones pequeñas, en aquellos tiempos, eran muchas veces cordialmente íntimas. El viajante traía consigo el brillo de una reputación histórica; no hacía falta adulación para hacer los pedidos; y la inmensa e inmaculada respetabilidad del cliente lo convertía en igual de cualquier embajador. Era un caso de mutua estima y de ese fenómeno generador de confianza: «un antiguo cliente». El tono en que un viajante de mediana edad pronunciaba la expresión «un antiguo cliente» revelaba de golpe todo lo que había de romántico, formal y señorial en el comercio de los años medios de la época victoriana. En la época de los Baines, después de que hubiese llegado una de aquellas circulares de aviso elaboradamente grabadas («El Sr..., de nuestra casa, tendrá el placer de visitarle el próximo día... del corriente»), era fácil que en algunos casos John dijera el día... por la mañana: «Señora, ¿qué tiene usted esta noche para cenar?».

Al señor Gerald Scales nunca le habían invitado a cenar, ni siquiera había visto nunca al señor Baines, pero, como joven sucesor de un viajante de edad que gozaba del favor de la Plaza de San Lucas, en nombre de

Birkinshaws, desde antes de que existiera el ferrocarril, la señora Baines lo trataba con un ligero y agradable toque de familiaridad maternal y, estando en cierta ocasión sus hijas en la tienda durante su visita, había mandado a las torponas muchachas que le dieran la mano.

Sofía nunca olvidó aquel encuentro fugaz. El joven sin nombre vivía en su recuerdo, brillando intensamente como símbolo y encamación de la masculinidad y la elegancia.

Al volverlo a ver pareció como si se despertase de un sueño. Desde luego no era la misma. Sentada en la silla de su hermana, en el rincón, atrincherada detrás de las cajas perpendiculares, jugando nerviosamente con las tijeras, su bello rostro se había transfigurado en algo cautivadoramente angélico. Habría sido imposible que el señor Gerald Scales o cualquier otra persona creyera, viendo aquellos rasgos encantadores, sensibles, vivaces y perceptivos, que Sofía no poseyera un carácter de una dulzura y perfección celestiales. No sabía lo que hacía; no era más que la exquisita expresión de un profundo instinto de atraer y fascinar. Su propia alma emanaba de ella en una atmósfera de seducción y aquiescencia. ¿Acaso podían aquellos labios risueños torcerse en un duro mohín? ¿Acaso podía aquella delicada y blanda voz ser áspera? ¿Acaso podían aquellos ojos ardientes ser fríos y hostiles? Jamás! ¡La idea era inconcebible! Y el señor Gerald Scales, con la cabeza asomando por encima de las cajas, cedió al hechizo. ¡Es sorprendente que el señor Gerald Scales, con toda su experiencia, tuviera que acudir a Bursley para hallar la perla, el parangón, el ideal! Pero así fue. Se encontraron en un abandono igual; la única diferencia entre ellos fue que el señor Scales, por la fuerza de la costumbre, mantuvo la calma.

—Ya veo que están de vísperas —dijo.

Era cortés con las vísperas, pero ahora, con la inflexión de su voz más ligera posible, puso las vísperas en su nivel adecuado en el plan de las cosas, convirtiéndolo en una nimiedad local. A Sofía le encantó; estaba sedienta de simpatía en lo que se refiere a despreciar las cosas locales.

—Mejor que ni se enterara —respondió, como queriendo decir que había toda clase de razones para que un hombre de sus intereses mundanos no se enterara.

—Si lo hubiera pensado seguro que me habría acordado. Pero no lo pensé —dijo él—¿Qué ha pasado con ese elefante?

—¡Oh! —exclamó Sofía—¿Ha oído algo de eso?

—Mi mozo de cuerda no hablaba de otra cosa.

—Claro —dijo ella—, en Bursley ha sido algo muy grande.

Cuando ella sonrió con una gentil piedad por el pobre Bursley, él, naturalmente, hizo lo mismo. Y pensó lo avanzada y abierta que era la generación joven con respecto a la anterior. Jamás se hubiera atrevido a expresar sus sentimientos sobre Bursley a la señora Baines, ni siquiera al señor Povey (que, sin embargo, no pertenecía a ninguna generación), pero allí había una joven que verdaderamente los compartía.

Ella le contó toda la historia del elefante.

—Tiene que haber sido muy excitante —dijo él a pesar de sí mismo.

—Ya lo creo que lo fue —replicó Sofía.

Al fin y al cabo, Bursley iba ascendiendo en la estima de ambos.

—Y mamá, mi hermana y el señor Povey se han ido todos a verlo. Por eso no están.

El hecho de que el elefante pudiera haber sido motivo de que el señor Povey y la señora Baines se olvidaran de la visita del representante de Birkshaws fue una verdadera victoria definitiva para el elefante.

—¡Pero usted no! —exclamó él.

—No —repuso la joven—. Yo no.

—¿Por qué no fue usted también? —Él continuó sus halagadoras investigaciones con una generosa sonrisa.

—Es que no me apetecía —dijo ella con orgullosa despreocupación.

—Me imagino, entonces, que estará a cargo de la tienda.

—No —respondió ella—. Por casualidad había bajado a buscar estas tijeras. Eso es todo.

—He visto a su hermana muchas veces —dijo él—. ¿Muchas veces, he dicho? Me refiero, en general, a cuando vengo; pero a usted nunca.

—Yo no estoy nunca en la tienda —dijo— Hoy es sólo de forma accidental.

—¡Oh! ¿Entonces deja la tienda a su hermana?

—Sí. —No le dijo nada de la enseñanza.

Después hubo un silencio. Sofía daba gracias a Dios por estar escondida de la curiosidad de la tienda. Nadie en la tienda podía verla, y del joven sólo la espalda; la conversación se desarrollaba en voz baja. Sofía dio unos golpecitos con el pie en el suelo, fijó la vista en la gastada y pulida superficie del mostrador, con el metro de latón clavado en el borde, y luego volvió con inquietud a la izquierda, como si examinara la parte de atrás de los gorritos negros colgados en los altos estantes del gran escaparate. Después su mirada tropezó con la del joven durante un importante momento.

—Sí —musitó. Alguien tenía que decir algo. Si dejaban de oír en la tienda el murmullo de sus voces se preguntarían qué les pasaba.

El señor Scales miró su reloj.

—Supongo que si vengo otra vez hacia las dos... —comenzó.

—¡Oh, sí; a esa hora seguro que están! —saltó Sofía antes de que él pudiese concluir.

Él se marchó con precipitación, de una manera extraña, sin darle la mano (claro que hubiera sido difícil, se dijo ella, pasar el brazo por encima de las cajas) y sin expresar la esperanza de volver a verla. Sofía atisbo por entre los gorritos negros y vio al mozo terciarse la tira de cuero sobre los hombros, levantar la parte trasera de la carretilla y ponerse en marcha empujándola, pero no vio al señor Scales. Estaba embriagada; por su cerebro daban vueltas pensamientos como el cargamento suelto en un barco bamboleante. Se alteraba todo su concepto de sí misma; se alteraba su actitud hacia la vida. El pensamiento que con más fuerza chocaba contra los demás era: «¡Es ahora cuando empiezo a vivir!».

Y mientras corría escaleras arriba para reanudar la vigilancia de su padre, trató de idear un método de apariencia inocente para volver a ver al señor Scales en su siguiente visita. Y se hacía cábalas acerca de su nombre.

III

Al llegar Sofía a la habitación le sorprendió ver que la cabeza y la barba de su padre no estaban es su lugar acostumbrado en la almohada. Sólo pudo distinguir algo inusual que caía por el lado de la cama. Pasaron unos segundos —no mensurables en tiempo— y vio que la parte superior de su cuerpo se había deslizado hacia abajo y su cabeza colgaba, invertida, cerca del suelo entre la cama y el diván. La cara, el cuello y las manos estaban oscuros y congestionados; tenía la boca abierta y la lengua sobresalía entre los labios negros, hinchados y cubiertos de mucosidades; los ojos se le salían de las órbitas y miraba con frialdad y fijeza. Lo que había sucedido era que el señor Baines se había despertado y, en su inquietud, se había deslizado parcialmente del lecho y había muerto asfixiado. Después de haber sido incansablemente vigilado durante catorce años, se había aprovechado, con la natural perversidad de un inválido, del breve descuido de Sofía para expirar. ¡Dígase lo que se diga, a Sofía, en medio de su horror y de su terrible pesar y vergüenza, no dejaba de venirle a la cabeza la idea de que lo había hecho a propósito!

Salió corriendo de la habitación, sabiendo de manera intuitiva que estaba muerto, y llamó a Maggie gritando a voz en cuello; la casa repitió el eco.

—Sí, señorita —dijo Maggie desde muy cerca, pues salía de la habitación del señor Povey con un orinal.

—Ve ahora mismo a buscar al señor Critchlow. Date prisa. Tal como estás. Es papá...

Maggie, percibiendo oscuramente que había un desastre en el ambiente, engreída y con una especie de luctuosa alegría, dejó caer su orinal exactamente en medio del pasillo y casi se cayó por las retorcidas escaleras. Uno de los más profundos instintos de Maggie, siempre ahogado por el severo dominio de la señora Baines, era dejar orinales en puntos destacados de los principales trayectos de la casa; aquella vez, adivinando de lo que se trataba, aquel instinto llameó convirtiéndose en insurrección.

No había habido jamás para Sofía una noche de insomnio tan larga como los tres minutos que transcurrieron hasta que llegó el señor Critchlow. Mientras permanecía en pie en la estera de la puerta del dormitorio trataba de arrastrar de las vísperas a su madre, a Constanza y al señor Povey mediante fuerza magnética para traerlos a casa y contraía los músculos en aquel extraño esfuerzo. Tenía la sensación de que no podía continuar viviendo si el secreto del dormitorio seguía sin conocerse un instante más, tan intensa era su tortura, pero también que era preciso soportar la tortura que no se podía soportar. ¡Ni un ruido en la casa! ¡Sólo el rumor lejano de las vísperas!

«¿Por qué me olvidé de papá? —se decía con temor—. Sólo quería decirle a *él* que todos habían salido y volver enseguida. ¿Por qué me olvidé de papá?». Nunca podría convencer a nadie de que se había olvidado literalmente de la existencia de su padre durante diez minutos; pero era cierto, por espantoso que fuera.

Entonces hubo ruidos abajo.

—¡Dios nos asista! ¡Dios nos asista! —se oyó la desagradable voz del señor Critchlow al subir la escalera a saltos con sus largas piernas; tropezó con el orinal—, ¿Qué pasa? —Llevaba puesto su delantal blanco y las gafas en la huesuda mano.

—Es papá..., está... —balbuceó Sofía.

Se hizo a un lado para que entrara el primero en la habitación. Él le dirigió una mirada intensa y, por así decirlo, resentida, y entró. Ella le siguió tímidamente y se quedó cerca dé la puerta mientras el señor Critchlow inspeccionaba su obra. Él se puso las gafas con extraña lentitud y luego, doblando las rodillas, se inclinó para examinar de cerca a John Baines. Permaneció unos momentos mirándolo así, fijamente; con las manos en las rodillas, cubiertas por el delantal; luego agarró la masa inerte y la volvió a colocar en el lecho y limpió aquellos cuajados labios con el delantal.

Sofía oyó una ruidosa respiración detrás de ella. Era Maggie. Oyó un sollozo estrepitoso; Maggie estaba mostrando su emoción.

—¡Ve a buscar al médico! —bramó el señor Critchlow—, ¡Y no te quedes ahí con la boca abierta!

—Corre a avisar al médico, Maggie —dijo Sofía.

—¿Cómo has dejado que se cayera? —preguntó el señor Critchlow.

—Yo había salido de la habitación. Sólo bajé un momento a la tienda...

—¡Coqueteando con ese joven Scales! —exclamó el señor Critchlow con diabólica ferocidad—. ¡Bien; has matado a tu padre; eso es todo!

¡Sin duda estaba en la puerta de su establecimiento y vio entrar al viajante! Y precisamente era característico en él lanzarse a ciegas sobre una conclusión horrible y tener razón después de todo. Para Sofía, el señor Critchlow había sido siempre la personificación de la malignidad y la malevolencia, y ahora estas cualidades suyas hacían que para ella fuera casi obsceno. Su orgullo le aportó enormes refuerzos y se aproximó al lecho.

—¿Está muerto? —preguntó en voz baja. (Dentro, en alguna parte, una voz susurraba: «Así que se apellida Scales».)

—¿No te acabo de decir que está muerto?

—¡Un orinal en la escalera!

Aquella templada exclamación procedía del pasillo. La señora Baines, a quien desagradaban las muchedumbres por las calles, había vuelto sola; había dejado a Constanza al cuidado del señor Povey. Como había entrado en la casa por la tienda y el entresuelo, había reparado primero en el fenómeno del orinal, prueba de su teoría de la incurable falta de pulcritud de Maggie.

—¡A ver al elefante, me imagino! —dijo el señor Critchlow, con feroz sarcasmo, al reconocer la voz de la señora Baines.

Sofía dio un brinco en dirección a la puerta, como para impedirle la entrada a su madre. Pero ésta abría ya la puerta.

—Bueno, corazón... —empezaba alegremente.

El señor Critchlow se puso frente a ella. Y no tuvo más piedad por la madre que por la hija. Estaba terriblemente enojado porque su preciada posesión había sido irremediablemente dañada por el momentáneo descuido de una muchacha tonta. ¡Sí, John Baines era propiedad suya, su juguete favorito! Estaba convencido de que sólo él lo había mantenido con vida durante aquellos catorce años, sólo él comprendía al enfermo, nadie más que él había sido capaz de hacer gala de sentido común en la habitación de aquél. Había llegado a considerar en cierto modo a John Baines como creación suya. Y ahora ellas, con su estupidez, su negligencia, sus elefantes, entre todas habían acabado con John Baines. Siempre había sabido que llegaría a suceder, y había sucedido.

—¡Ella dejó que se cayera de la cama y ahora es usted viuda, señora! —anunció con una virulencia difícil de concebir. Sus angulosos rasgos y sus ojos oscuros expresaban un odio asesino por todas las mujeres llamadas Baines.

—¡Mamá! —gritó Sofía—. ¡Sólo bajé un momento a la tienda a..., a...!

Agarró el brazo de su madre en una frenética agonía.

—¡Hija mía! —exclamó la señora Baines, poniéndose milagrosamente a la altura de las circunstancias con una serena benevolencia en su tono y en su gesto que permaneció para siempre como algo sublime en el tempestuoso corazón de Sofía—, ¿Ha enviado por el médico? —preguntó al señor Critchlow.

El destino de su esposo no era ningún misterio para la señora Baines. Todo el mundo había sido advertido mil veces del peligro de dejar solo al paralítico, cuya vida dependía de su postura y cuya inquietud era por tanto una constante amenaza de muerte para él. Durante cinco mil noches, ella se había despertado infaliblemente cada vez que él se movía y lo había colocado bien a la luz parpadeante de una lamparita de aceite. Pero Sofía, desgraciada criatura, lo había dejado solo y ya está. Eso era todo.

El señor Critchlow y la viuda contemplaron, como esperando en vano, el lamentable cadáver, la parte más visible del cual era la blanca barba. No sabían que estaban contemplando una época desaparecida. John Baines pertenecía al pasado, a la época en la que los hombres sí que pensaban de verdad en su alma, en la que los oradores, con sus palabras, podían mover a las multitudes al furor o a la piedad, en la que nadie había aprendido a apresurarse, en la que el Pueblo no hacía sino darse la vuelta en la cama, en la que la única belleza de la vida residía en su inflexible y pausada dignidad, en la que el infierno en verdad no tenía fondo y una Biblia de cierres dorados constituía el secreto de la grandeza de Inglaterra. La Inglaterra de los años centrales de la época victoriana yacía en aquel lecho de caoba. Los ideales habían dejado de existir con John Baines. Es así como mueren los ideales; no con la pompa convencional de una muerte honorable, sino tristemente, innoblemente, cuando uno vuelve la cabeza...

Y el señor Povey y Constanza, muy tímidos, fueron a ver al elefante muerto y volvieron, y en la esquina de King Street exclamó Constanza con animación:

—¡Anda! ¿Quién ha salido dejando la puerta lateral abierta?

Era que había llegado el médico hacía rato y Maggie, al acompañarlo arriba con compasiva precipitación, se había olvidado de cerrar la puerta.

Y utilizaron la puerta lateral, con cierto sentimiento de culpabilidad, para evitar los ojos de la tienda. Temían que en la sala fueran el centro de una curiosidad medio irónica y medio desaprobadora, pues ¿no habían hecho una escapada? Así que entraron sin hacer ruido.

El verdadero asesino estaba almorzando en el restaurante del «Tigre», frente al ayuntamiento.

Se colocaron varios postigos en los escaparates para indicar que había habido un fallecimiento; la noticia se conoció de inmediato en los círculos comerciales de toda la ciudad. Muchas personas señalaron la coincidencia de que el señor Baines hubiera muerto mientras había una exposición de artículos de luto en su establecimiento. Esta casualidad se consideró extremadamente siniestra; al parecer todo el mundo pensó que por la tranquilidad del espíritu no había que indagar demasiado en tales cosas. Desde el momento en que se colocaron los postigos prescritos, John Baines y su funeral empezaron a adquirir importancia en Bursley, una importancia que creció velozmente casi de hora en hora. Las vísperas siguieron su marcha, excepto en que el jefe de policía, a raíz de las protestas expresadas por el señor Critchlow y otros ciudadanos, bajó a la Plaza de San Lucas y prohibió las actividades de la orquesta de Wombwell. Wombwell y el jefe de policía diferían en lo que se refiere a la justicia de este decreto, pero todas las personas de buenos sentimientos alabaron al jefe de policía y éste consideró que había aumentado la buena fama de la villa en cuanto a propiedad y decoro. Se observó también, no sin un estremecimiento ante lo misterioso, que aquella noche los leones y los tigres se comportaron como corderos, en tanto que la anterior no habían dejado dormir a nadie en la Plaza con sus rugidos.

El jefe de policía no fue el único individuo a cuya ayuda recurrió el señor Critchlow por la fama de su amigo. El señor Critchlow se pasó horas rememorando a los ciudadanos principales la justa conciencia de la pasada grandeza de John Baines. Estaba decidido a que su preciado juguete desapareciera bajo tierra con la debida pompa y no dejó piedra sin remover con este fin. Fue a Hanbridge en el todavía asombroso coche de caballos a ver al editor y propietario de la *Señal de Staffordshire* (a la sazón un semanario de dos peniques sin pensamiento alguno de ediciones dedicadas al fútbol), y el mismo día del funeral esta publicación sacó una extensa y elocuente biografía de John Baines. Dicha biografía, que daba detalles de su vida pública, le devolvía su legítimo lugar en la memoria cívica como ex jefe de alguaciles, ex presidente de la Junta de Entierros y de la Asociación de las Cinco Ciudades para el Progreso del Conocimiento Útil, y asimismo como «primer promotor» de la Ley de Peaje local, de las negociaciones para el nuevo ayuntamiento y de la fachada corintia de la capilla wesleyana; narraba la anécdota de su valiente discurso desde el pórtico del Matadero durante los disturbios de 1848 y no omitía un panegírico de su firme adhesión a las viejas y sabias máximas comerciales inglesas y de su alejamiento de los peligrosos métodos modernos. Ya en los años sesenta había levantado lo moderno su desvergonzada cabeza. El panegírico se cerraba con una apreciación de la fortaleza del difunto en la terrible tribulación con que la divina providencia había tenido a bien probarlo; finalmente, la *Señal* expresaba su absoluta convicción de que su ciudad natal levantaría un cenotafio en su honor. El señor Critchlow, poco familiarizado con la palabra «cenotafio», consultó el Diccionario Worcester, y cuando halló que significaba «monumento funerario a una persona que está enterrada en otra parte», se sintió tan complacido con el lenguaje de la *Señal* como con la idea y decidió que tenía que haber cenotafio.

La casa y la tienda bullían con los preparativos del funeral. Todo se cambió. El señor Povey tuvo la amabilidad de dormir tres noches en el sofá de la sala para que la señora Baines pudiera disponer de su habitación. El funeral llegó a constituir una obsesión, pues había que hacer innumerables cosas, y ello de manera suntuosa y en estricto acuerdo con los precedentes. Estaban el duelo familiar, la comida fúnebre, la elección del texto para el recordatorio, la composición de la leyenda que había de figurar en el ataúd, las disposiciones legales, las cartas a los parientes, la selección de los invitados y las cuestiones de las campanas, la carroza fúnebre, las plumas, el número de caballos y la fosa. Nadie tenía tiempo para entregarse al dolor excepto la tía María, que, después de ayudar a amortajar el cadáver, se limitó a estar sentada lamentándose sin cesar durante horas por haber estado ausente la mañana fatal. «Si no hubiera estado tan empeñada en sacar brillo a mis candelabros —repetía llorosa— puede que ahora estuviera vivo y bien». No es que se hubiese informado a la tía María de las circunstancias exactas de su muerte; no sabía de manera clara que el señor Baines había muerto por un descuido. Pero, como el señor Critchlow, estaba convencida de que era la única persona en el mundo verdaderamente capaz de cuidar al señor Baines. Fuera de la familia, nadie más que el señor Critchlow y el doctor Harrop sabían cómo había concluido el mártir su carrera. El doctor Harrop, cuando se le preguntó si sería necesaria una investigación, reflexionó un momento y dijo: «No». Y añadió: «Cuanto menos se dice, antes se arregla: ¡háganme caso!». Y le hicieron caso. Era el sentido común con bombachos.

En cuanto a la tía María, la tía Harriet la mandó a paseo con sus gimoteos. La llegada a la casa de esta genuina tía desde Axe, de esta majestuosa y enorme viuda a quien hasta la imperiosa señora Baines miraba con cierto temor, puso un sello de definitiva solemnidad en todo el acontecimiento. En el dormitorio del señor Povey, la señora Baines cayó en los brazos de la tía Harriet como un niño, sollozando:

—¡Si hubiera sido cualquier otra cosa y no ese elefante!

Aquél fue el único momento de debilidad de la señora Baines de principio a fin.

La tía Harriet constituía una fuente inagotable de autoridad en todos los detalles concernientes a entierros. Y con una serie de preguntas que concluían con la palabra «hermana» y de respuestas que concluían con la palabra «hermana», el prodigioso trabajo inherente al funeral se fue llevando a cabo poco a poco y a plena satisfacción. El vestuario y la comida superaban a todos los demás asuntos en complejidad y dificultad. Pero la mañana del funeral la tía Harriet tuvo la satisfacción de contemplar a su hermana menor convertida en el centro de un tremendo capullo de crespón cuyo menor pliegue era perfecto. Fue como si la tía Harriet la recibiera formalmente, como un veterano, en el augusto ejército de las reliquias. Viéndolas una al lado de la otra supervisando la mesa especial que se estaba poniendo en el entresuelo para la comida, parecía inconcebible que hubieran reposado juntas en el limitado lecho del señor Povey. Bajaron del entresuelo a la cocina, donde fueron inspeccionados los últimos y delicados platos. La tienda, por supuesto, estaba cerrada aquel día, pero el señor Povey estaba allí trabajando; para la mirada de la tía Harriet, a la que nada escapaba, él era lo siguiente después de los platos.

—¿Tiene preparadas ya las cajas de los guantes? —le preguntó.

—Sí, señora Maddack.

—¿No olvidará tener una medida a mano, verdad?

—No, señora Maddack.

—Ya verá que los que más necesita son siete y tres cuartos y ocho.

—Sí. He contado con eso.

—Si se coloca usted detrás de la puerta lateral y pone las cajas encima del armonio, podrá llegar a cada uno según entre.

—Eso es lo que había pensado, señora Maddack.

Se fue arriba. La señora Baines había vuelto al entresuelo y estaba alisando las arrugas del mantel de damasco blanco y colocando los platos de cristal de la mermelada a la misma distancia unos de otros.

—Ven, hermana. Una última mirada.

Y entraron en la estancia mortuoria a ver al señor Baines antes de que se clavara la tapa para siempre. En la muerte había recuperado algo de su antigua dignidad, pero aun así asustaba verlo. Las dos viudas se inclinaron sobre él, una a cada lado, y contemplaron gravemente aquel fatigado rostro, pálido y crispado, pulcramente rodeado de tela blanca.

—Voy a buscar a Constanza y a Sofía —dijo la señora Maddack con voz llorosa— ¿Vas al salón, querida?

Pero la señora Maddack sólo consiguió llevar a Constanza.

Luego se oyeron ruedas en King Street. El prolongado rito del funeral había comenzado. Todos los invitados, una vez el señor Povey les hubo medido la mano y les hubo ofrecido un par de los mejores guantes negros de cabritilla, hubieron de subir la escalera a echar una mirada al cadáver del señor Baines, pasando después al salón a dar brevemente el pésame a la viuda. Y todos los invitados, aun dándose cuenta de la enormidad de semejante idea, pensaron lo magnífico que era que John Baines hubiera muerto por fin. El movimiento en la escalera era continuo; al final el propio señor Baines bajó por ella, chocando contra las esquinas, y se puso a la cabeza de un cortejo de veinte vehículos.

El té fúnebre no terminó hasta las siete, cinco horas después del comienzo del rito. Fue una comida gigantesca e impecable, digna del lejano pasado del señor Baines. Sólo faltaron en ella dos personas: John Baines y Sofía. Todo el mundo reparó en que la silla de Sofía estaba vacía; la señora Maddack explicó que estaba muy nerviosa y no podía confiar en sí misma. La reunión hizo grandes esfuerzos por mostrarse lúgubre e inconsolable, pero el secreto alivio que causaba el fallecimiento no pudo ocultarse del todo. La general simulación de profundo pesar no podía salir indemne de aquel secreto alivio ni de la exquisitez de los manjares.

Para ofensa de varios parientes importantes venidos de lejos, el señor Critchlow presidió informalmente aquel cónclave de graves hombres de elevado linaje y mujeres con miriñaque. Había cerrado su establecimiento, cosa que jamás había sucedido en un día laborable, y tenía mucho que decir acerca de ese extraordinario cierre. Se debía tanto al elefante como al funeral. El elefante se había convertido en víctima de

la locura de los *souvenirs*. Ya por la noche habían robado los colmillos; luego desaparecieron las patas, para hacer paragüeros con ellas, y la mayor parte de la carne había desaparecido en trocitos. Todo el mundo en Bursley había decidido participar del elefante. Una consecuencia fue que todas las farmacias de la ciudad fueron asaltadas por un rosario de arrapiezos. «Por favor, un poco de alumbre pa' quitarle el olor a un cacho de elefante». El señor Critchlow odiaba a los arrapiezos.

—«¡Ya te voy a alumbrar yo a ti!», digo, y así lo hice. Lo alumbré de mi farmacia con la mano del almirez. Y como hubo uno hubo veinte desde la hora de abrir hasta las nueve. «George —le dije a mi aprendiz — cierra la farmacia. Mi amigo John Baines va hoy a su última morada y voy a cerrar. Ya he tenido bastante alumbre para un solo día».

El elefante dio materia de conversación hasta después del segundo relevo de bollos calientes. Cuando el señor Critchlow estuvo repleto, sacó la *Señal* de su bolsillo con aire de importancia, se puso las gafas y leyó la necrológica en su totalidad con acento pausado e imponente. Antes de que llegase al final, la señora Baines empezó a darse cuenta de que la familiaridad no le había dejado percibir las heroicas cualidades de su difunto esposo. Aquellos catorce años de constantes cuidados quedaron casi por completo en el olvido y lo vio en toda su fuerza y su esplendor. Cuando el señor Critchlow llegó al panegírico del esposo y padre, la señora Baines se levantó y abandonó la estancia. Los invitados se miraron unos a otros, compadecidos de ella. El señor Critchlow le echó una mirada por encima de las gafas y continuó leyendo sin detenerse. Tras concluir abordó la cuestión del cenotafio.

La señora Baines, expulsada del banquete por sus sentimientos, entró en el salón. Estaba allí Sofía, que al ver lágrimas en los ojos de su madre dejó escapar un sollozo y se arrojó en sus brazos, ocultando el rostro en el amplio crespón, que raspó su fina piel.

—Mamá —dijo con vehemencia, llorando—, quiero dejar el colegio ahora. Quiero complacerte. Haré cualquier cosa para complacerte. ¡Iré a la tienda si tú quieres! —Su voz se ahogó en sollozos.

—Cálmate, hija mía —dijo la señora Baines con ternura, acariciándola. Era un triunfo para la madre en el momento mismo en que necesitaba un triunfo.

Capítulo V

EL VIAJANTE

I

«EXQUISITO, ls., 11d.»[31]

Aquellos singulares signos los estaba pintando Constanza en negro brillante sobre un rectángulo de cartón blanco una tarde en la sala. Con el costado izquierdo hacia la chimenea y el gas siseante, estaba sentada a la mesa de comer, cubierta con un mantel a cuadros rojos y blancos. Llevaba un vestido de color carmesí oscuro; al cuello un camafeo y una cadena de oro, y sobre los hombros un chal blanco de punto, pues hacía mucho frío, ya que el clima inglés era mucho más severo y peligroso en aquellos tiempos que ahora. Se inclinaba sobre su tarea, ladeando un poco la cabeza, asomando la punta de la lengua entre los labios y poniendo toda la energía de su alma y de su cuerpo en un intenso esfuerzo por hacer de la mejor manera posible lo que estaba haciendo.

—¡Espléndido! —dijo el señor Povey.

El señor Povey estaba frente a ella en la mesa; tenía los codos encima de ésta y la vigilaba atentamente, con la afanosa y divina ansiedad de un soñador que presenciara la realización de su sueño.

Y Constanza, sin mover ninguna parte de su persona excepto la cabeza, levantó la mirada hacia él y sonrió un momento, dejándole ver su encantadora naricilla respingona.

Los dos, sin saberlo ni imaginarlo, estaban haciendo historia: la historia del comercio. No tenían sospecha alguna de que fueran las fuerzas del futuro actuando insidiosamente para destruir lo que las fuerzas del pasado habían creado, pero así era. Sólo eran conscientes de su deseo de cumplir con su obligación en la tienda y para con la tienda; quizá ni siquiera se les había ocurrido que ese deseo, que cada uno de ellos estimulaba en el otro, había adquirido las dimensiones de una pasión. Estaba envejeciendo al señor Povey y había convertido a Constanza en una joven enormemente ingeniosa y preocupada.

El señor Povey había estado prestando atención recientemente a la cuestión de las etiquetas. No es demasiado decir que el señor Povey, a quien el cielo había concedido muy poca imaginación, había no obstante descubierto su pequeña parcela de imaginación en los rincones de su ser y la aplicó con eficacia a las etiquetas. Éstas seguían líneas convencionales. Había pesadas etiquetas alargadas para pantalones de franela, camisería y otros artículos que se vendían por unidades; etiquetas más pequeñas y ligeras para artículos intermedios, y etiquetas en forma de diamante (que no contenían más que el precio) para gorros, guantes y bagatelas en general. Las leyendas de las etiquetas no ofrecían ninguna clase de invención original. Las palabras «resistente», «duradero», «inencogible», «lo último», «barato», «elegante», «novedad», «selecto», «nuevo» y «de buen gusto» agotaban todo el vocabulario de las etiquetas. Ahora el señor Povey daba importancia a éstas y, como se le reconocía como el mejor escaparatista de Bursley, sus opiniones tenían derecho a ser respetadas. Soñó con otras etiquetas, de formas originales y con leyendas originales. En suma, realizó, por cuanto atañe a etiquetas, la rara proeza de librarse de ideas preconcebidas y enfocar el tema con ojos nuevos y virginales. Cuando indicó lo que deseaba al señor Chawner, el dueño de la papelería al por mayor que suministraba etiquetas a todas las Cinco Ciudades, el señor Chawner se mostró inquieto y preocupado; incluso estaba escandalizado. Para él siempre había habido determinados géneros de etiquetas bien definidos y no podía concebir la existencia de otros. Cuando el señor Povey le sugirió etiquetas circulares, etiquetas con una línea azul y roja alrededor, etiquetas con leyendas como «insuperable», «refinado» o «fíjese, por favor», el señor Chawner gruñó y carraspeó y al final afirmó que le sería imposible facturar aquellas ridículas etiquetas, que constituirían un ultraje para el decoro del comercio.

Si no hubiera dado la casualidad de que el señor Povey era un hombre extremadamente obstinado, tal vez hubiera sido derrotado por el burdo conservadurismo del señor Chawner. Pero el señor Povey era obstinado y poseía recursos de ingenio que poco sospechaba el señor Chawner. La grande y esforzada marcha del progreso no había de ser obstaculizada por el señor Chawner. El señor Povey empezó a hacer sus propias etiquetas. Al principio sufrió como sufren todos los reformadores e inventores. Utilizó la superficie interna de cajas de cuellos y tinta y plumas corrientes, y los resultados fueron tales que hacían pensar a los clientes que

los Baines eran demasiado pobres o mezquinos para encargar etiquetas como las demás tiendas. Pues las etiquetas compradas tenían un lustre marfileño y la tinta era negra y brillante, y los bordes eran muy rectos y no se veía amarillo entre las dos capas de blanco, mientras que las etiquetas del señor Povey eran de un blanco azulado sin lustre, la tinta no era negra ni brillante y los bordes eran de una irregularidad de aficionado; las etiquetas tenían un aire inconfundible de haberse hecho «de otra cosa»; además, los letreros no tenían el estilo libre y elegante de las del señor Chawner.

¿Y acaso le animó la señora Baines en este decidido empeño en nombre del negocio *de ella?* ¡En absoluto! La actitud de la señora Baines, cuando no desdeñosa, fue hostil. ¡Así es de curiosa la naturaleza humana, así es de ciego el hombre a su propio provecho! La vida era muy complicada para el señor Povey. Tal vez hubiera sido menos complicada si hubiese tenido cartón de Bristol y tinta china; con estos materiales habría podido hacer maravillas para acallar todo prejuicio y estupidez; pero eran demasiado caros. Sin embargo perseveró y Constanza le ayudó moralmente; obtuvo de Constanza su inspiración y su valor. En vez de la superficie interior de las cajas de cuellos, probó con la exterior, que era por lo menos lustrosa. Pero la tinta no «agarraba». Hizo tantos experimentos como habría de hacer Edison y tuvo tantos fracasos como él. Entonces a Constanza se le ocurrió la idea mezclar azúcar con la tinta. Era una sencilla e inocente criatura: ¿por qué la elegiría la providencia para ser la vasija de tan sublime idea? ¡Un enigma desconcertante, que sin embargo no inquietó al señor Povey! A éste le pareció muy natural que ella lo salvara. Y lo salvó. La tinta con azúcar «agarraría» en cualquier cosa y brillaba como una bota de charol. Además, Constanza desarrolló una «mano» para los letreros que superaba a la del señor Povey. Entre los dos hicieron docenas de etiquetas, unas etiquetas que, poseyendo casi toda la elegancia y el acabado de las del señor Chawner, eran muy superiores a ellas en originalidad y mucho más llamativas. Constanza y el señor Povey estaban encantados y fascinados con ellas. Por lo que se refiere a la señora Baines, dijo poco, pero el espíritu moderno estaba demasiado eufórico por su éxito como para cuidarse de si decía poco o mucho. Y cada pocos días el señor Povey pensaba alguna palabra nueva y maravillosa para poner en una etiqueta.

Su último milagro era la palabra «exquisito». A Constanza y al señor Povey, «exquisito», pinchada en un trozo de ancha cinta de tartán, les parecía el colmo de lo adecuado. ¡Una culminación digna de cerrar el año! El señor Povey había recortado la tarjeta y esbozado la palabra y los números a lápiz y Constanza estaba haciendo su parte ejecutiva de la empresa. Estaban muy Contentos, absorbidos en aquella tarea estrictamente comercial. ¡La dura obligación, el puro deseo de la prosperidad de la tienda, los habían tenido trabajando intensamente desde antes de las ocho de la mañana!

Se abrió la puerta de la escalera y apareció la señora Baines con sombrero, pieles y guantes, vestida para salir. Había dejado el capullo de crespón, pero todavía llevaba luto. Estaba más rolliza que nunca.

—¡Pero bueno! —exclamó—, ¡Aún no estás preparada! ¿Cómo es posible?

—¡Oh, madre, qué susto me has dado! —protestó Constanza—. ¿Qué hora es? ¡Aún no será hora de irnos!

—¡Mira el reloj! —dijo secamente la señora Baines.

—¡Cómo me iba a figurar...! —murmuró Constanza, confusa.

—Vamos, coge tus cosas y no me tengas esperando —dijo la señora Baines, acercándose a la ventana y apartando la cortina para mirar al exterior.

—Sigue nevando —observó—. ¡Ah, por fin se va la banda! No sé cómo pueden tocar con este tiempo. Por cierto, ¿qué melodía era esa que acaban de tocar? No consigo distinguir si es «La pelirroja» o...

—¿La banda? —interrogó Constanza—. ¡Qué bobos!

Ni ella ni el señor Povey habían oído los sones de la Banda Municipal de Bursley, que había estado animando la temporada según su costumbre habitual. ¡Aquellos dos jóvenes, prácticos, imbuidos de su deber y dotados de sentido común, estaban tan absortos en sus esfuerzos en pro de la buena marcha de la tienda que no sólo se habían olvidado por completo de la hora sino que tampoco habían reparado en la banda! Pero si Constanza hubiera estado atenta al menos habría fingido haberla oído.

—¿Qué es eso? —preguntó la señora Baines aproximando su corpulencia a la mesa y cogiendo una etiqueta.

El señor Povey no dijo nada. Constanza respondió:

—Al señor Povey se le ocurrió hoy. ¿No crees que está muy bien, mamá?

—Me temo que no —replicó fríamente la señora Baines.

Ya había desaprobado con suavidad algunas palabras, pero «exquisito» le pareció una tontería y además fuera de lugar; consideró que no haría más que atraer el ridículo sobre la tienda. ¡«Exquisito», escrito en una etiqueta, en el escaparate! ¡No! ¿Qué le habría parecido a John Baines aquello de «exquisito»?

—¡Exquisito! —Repitió la palabra con una inflexión sarcástica, poniendo el acento, como hacía todo el mundo, en la segunda sílaba[32]—. No creo que sirva.

—¿Por qué no, mamá?

—No es apropiado, querida.

Dejó caer la etiqueta de su mano enguantada. El señor Povey había enrojecido intensamente. Aunque hablaba poco, era tan sensible como obstinado. Expresó sus sentimientos echando mano a la etiqueta y arrojándola al fuego.

La situación era muy violenta. No se puede tratar a empleados inestimables como el señor Povey como si fuesen máquinas; la señora Baines vio de inmediato que se precisaba tacto.

—Ve a mi habitación a arreglarte, cariño —dijo a Constanza—; Sofía está allí. Hay un buen fuego. Yo tengo sólo que hablar con Maggie. —Y, con mucho tacto, salió de la habitación.

El señor Povey dirigió la mirada a la chimenea y a los restos de la etiqueta. El comercio iba mal; debido al mal tiempo y a la guerra, había mucha indigencia; él había hecho todo lo posible por la buena marcha de la tienda ¡y he ahí la recompensa!

Constanza tenía los ojos llenos de lágrimas.

—¡No haga caso! —murmuró, y se fue arriba.

Todo terminó en un momento.

II

En la iglesia metodista wesleyana del Alto del Pato había una congregación plena e influyente. En aquellos tiempos la gente influyente no sólo se conformaba con vivir en la ciudad en que habían vivido sus padres, sin soñar con residencias campestres y aire sin humo; se conformaba también con creer lo que sus padres habían creído acerca del principio y el fin de todas las cosas. Lo incognoscible no existía en aquellos tiempos. Los misterios eternos eran tan sencillos como una suma; un niño podía decirle a cualquiera con absoluta certeza dónde se hallaría y qué estaría haciendo al cabo de un millón de años y, con toda exactitud, qué pensaría Dios de uno. En consecuencia, al ser todos del mismo parecer, se reunían al completo en determinadas ocasiones y en determinados lugares con el fin de expresar el parecer universal. Y en la iglesia metodista wesleyana, por ejemplo, en vez de un pequeño grupo de personas perturbadoramente conscientes de constituir una minoría, se había reunido, como en aquella ocasión, una magnífica y orgullosa mayoría profundamente sabedora de que tenía razón y estaba en lo cierto.

Y el ministro, junto con los ministros menores, se arrodilló y se cubrió la cara con las manos en el magnífico estrado de caoba; detrás de él, en lo que se llamaba todavía «la orquesta» (aunque no había sonado en ella desde hacía décadas instrumento musical alguno salvo el gran órgano), el coro se arrodilló y sus miembros se cubrieron la cara con las manos; todo alrededor, en la galería ricamente decorada con pinturas y en el piso bajo, numerosas filas de personas, en cómoda posición de cuerpo y alma, se arrodillaron en los altos bancos y se cubrieron la cara con las manos. Y ante ellas flotó, en el profundo y prolongado silencio, la clara visión de Jehová en el trono, un Dios de unos sesenta años con barba y bigote y una expresión evasiva que declinaba decir si requería o no nuevos derramamientos de sangre; y este Dios, privado de alas, estaba rodeado de seres de blancas alas que se movían de acá para allá cantando; y a gran distancia había una obscena monstruosidad con pezuñas hendidas y rabo, muy peligrosa, grosera y entrometida, que podía vivir cómodamente en medio de un fuego de carbones y se complacía maligna e incansablemente en atraerlo a uno de manera fraudulenta a ese mismo fuego; pero ni que decir tiene que uno era demasiado sensato para

tragarse sus perversas ridiculeces. Una vez al año, durante diez minutos exactos, uno se arrodillaba de este modo, en masa, y por medio de la meditación se convencía de que era demasiado sensato para tragarse sus perversas ridiculeces. Y la hora era muy solemne, la más solemne de todas las horas.

¡Qué extraño que haya almas inmortales que tengan la temeridad de reflexionar sobre asuntos mundanos en esa hora! Sin embargo, no hay duda de que las había en la congregación; había muchas para las cuales la visión, aunque clara, era espasmódica y fugitiva. ¡Y entre los ocupantes del banco de la familia Baines! ¿Quién habría imaginado que el señor Povey, un converso reciente del metodismo primitivo de King Street al metodismo wesleyano del Alto del Pato, estaba engolfado en las etiquetas para el escaparate y en lo injustas que eran las mujeres en vez de pensar en sus relaciones con Jehová y con el del rabo? ¿Quién habría imaginado que la Constanza de afable mirada, modelo de hijas, estaba arriesgando su bienestar eterno por sonreír al del rabo, que, ocultando éste, había asumido la imagen del señor Povey? ¿Quién habría imaginado que la señora Baines, en lugar de decidir que fuera Jehová y no el del rabo quien tuviera dominio definitivo de ella, estaba decidiendo que fuera ella y no el señor Povey quien tuviera dominio definitivo de su casa y su tienda? Todo el banco desmentía su muy satisfactoria apariencia (y era posible que hubiera otros bancos igualmente engañosos).

Solamente Sofía, en el rincón junto a la pared, oprimiéndose convulsivamente el hermoso rostro severo con las manos, estaba verdaderamente enfrascada en las cosas inmortales. Corazón turbulento, la violencia de su vida espiritual la había hecho mayor de lo que decían sus años. ¡Nunca hubo una muchacha apasionada y orgullosa que se viera en el caso de Sofía! En su espléndido remordimiento por un fatal descuido, había renunciado a lo que amaba y se había arrojado en medio de lo que aborrecía. Estaba en su naturaleza. Lo había hecho altivamente y no con amabilidad, pero lo había hecho con toda su fuerza de voluntad. Constanza se había visto obligada a cederle el departamento de sombrerería, pues los dedos de Sofía tenían un don para el manejo de cintas y plumas que estaba fuera del alcance de Constanza. Sofía había hecho milagros en la sombrerería. Sí; y era muy cortés con las clientas, pero después, cuando éstas se marchaban, ¡que las madres, las hermanas y los señores Poveys se guardaran de sus feroces dardos!

Pero, ¿por qué cuando habían transcurrido casi tres meses desde la muerte de su padre pasaba cada vez más tiempo en la tienda, ardiendo secretamente de impaciencia? ¿Por qué, un día que entró un viajante desconocido y se anunció como el nuevo representante de Birkinshaws, por qué se extinguió toda su vitalidad y cayó gravemente enferma? Supo entonces que se había engañado a sí misma. Reconoció y admitió, humillándose hasta lo más bajo, que sus motivos para dejar a la señorita Chetwynd y ponerse a trabajar en la tienda eran, en el mejor de los casos, mezclados e impuros en extremo. Si continuaba con la señorita Chetwynd, jamás volvería a poner los ojos en Gerald Scales. Si se empleaba en la tienda era imposible que no volviera a encontrarse con él. A esta luz había que ver el auténtico cariz de su espléndido remordimiento. ¡Para ella era un terrible pensamiento! ¡Contaminaba su existencia! Y no podía confiar en nadie. Era incapaz de enseñar una herida. Un trimestre siguió a otro y no se supo nada más de Gerald Scales. Había sacrificado su vida por algo peor que nada. Había sido la causa de su propia tragedia. ¡Había matado a su padre, se había engañado y avergonzado a sí misma con un remordimiento horriblemente espurio, había cambiado el contento por la desdicha y el orgullo por la humillación... y junto con todo ello, Gerald Scales había desaparecido! Estaba destrozada.

Se entregó a la religión; sus conscientes virtudes cristianas, practicadas con severa inclemencia, fueron el cáncer de la familia. Así había transcurrido año y medio.

Y entonces, aquel último día del año, el segundo año de su vergüenza y de su viudez de corazón, reapareció el señor Scales. Sofía entró en la tienda por casualidad y se lo encontró hablando con su madre y con el señor Povey. Había vuelto al circuito provincial y a ella. Nadie observó la agitación de la joven, pues sujetó su cuerpo como con tenazas. No conocía la razón de su ausencia ni de su regreso. No sabía nada. Y durante las comidas no se dijo ni una palabra de ello. Y había pasado el día y llegado la noche, ¡y ahora estaba en la capilla, con Constanza a su lado y Gerald Scales en su alma! ¡Feliz mas allá de toda idea anterior de lo que era la felicidad! ¡Desgraciada más allá de una congoja indecible! ¡Y nadie lo sabía! ¿Con qué fin y propósito debía hacerse fuerte? ¿Debía esperar o debía desesperarle? «¡Dios mío, ayúdame!», susurró una y otra vez a Jehová siempre que la visión celestial brillaba entre las ruinas de sus meditaciones. «¡Dios mío, ayúdame!». Tenía la conciencia de que, cuando aquél estaba de un talante severo, podía ser indescriptiblemente cruel con ella.

¡Y siempre que sus ojos secos y ardientes miraban por entre sus dedos enguantados veía delante de ella, en la pared, una placa de mármol con una inscripción en letras doradas, el cenotafio! Se sabía de memoria todos los versos, de pausada grandilocuencia; versos tales como:

SIEMPRE DISPUESTO CON SU LENGUA, SU PLUMA Y SU BOLSA

A AYUDAR A LA IGLESIA DE SUS MAYORES

EN ELLA VIVIÓ Y EN ELLA MURIÓ

ALBERGANDO PROFUNDO Y ARDIENTE AFECTO

POR SU AMADA FE Y SU CREDO

Y luego:

SU COMPASIÓN REBASÓ LOS LÍMITES DE SU COMUNIDAD

SIEMPRE FUE EL PRIMERO PARA HACER UNA BUENA OBRA

Y SIRVIÓ AL CIRCUITO, A LA CIUDAD Y A LA REGIÓN

CON GRAN ACEPTACIÓN Y UTILIDAD

Así se había satisfecho como es debido la vanidad del señor Critchlow.

Conforme pasaban los minutos en el silencio de la capilla se hacía mayor la tensión emocional; los fieles suspiraban ruidosamente o suplicaban a Jehová una señal, o simplemente tosían una invocación. Y entonces, por fin, el reloj que había en medio de la balconada dio la única campanada al cual estaba limitado; los ministros se pusieron en pie, y tras ellos la congregación; todo el mundo sonrió como si fuese el milenio y no sólo el año nuevo el que entraba. Entonces llegó débilmente, a través de paredes y ventanas cerradas, un sonido de campanas, de sirenas de vapor y de silbatos. El ministro superintendente abrió su himnario y se cantó el himno que se cantaba en las capillas wesleyanas la mañana de año nuevo desde la época del propio John Wesley. El órgano concluyó con el estruendo de todos sus tubos; el ministro tuvo unas últimas palabras con Jehová y no quedó nada por hacer excepto perseverar en el buen comportamiento. Todos se inclinaron unos hacia otros por encima de los altos respaldos de los bancos.

—¡Feliz año nuevo!

—¡Gracias, igualmente!

—¡Otra vigilia que ha pasado!

—¡Ay, sí! —y un suspiro.

Entonces los pasillos se llenaron de gente en un momento y hubo joviales y optimistas empujones hacia la puerta. En el porche corintio se produjo un gran movimiento de colocación de abrigos, capotes, chanclos e incluso mitones y apertura de paraguas. Y la congregación salió entre remolinos de nieve, dividiéndose en varias procesiones oscuras que con pasos silenciosos bajaron Trafalgar Road, subieron y cruzaron la Plaza del Pato en dirección a la de San Lucas.

El señor Povey iba en medio de la señora Baines y Constanza.

—Cógete de mi brazo, cielo mío —dijo la señora Baines a Sofía.

Entonces el señor Povey y Constanza avanzaron delante a través de los montones de nieve. Sofía equilibró a aquella enorme forma oscilante, su madre. Debido a los aros de las faldas de ambas le costaba mucho trabajo mantenerse cerca de ella. La señora Baines se reía con la complaciente facilidad de la obesidad, aun cuando una caída le sería fatal. Pero, aunque se riera, Dios no la ayudaba. No sabía por dónde iba ni lo que podía pasarle a continuación.

—¡Vaya, válgame Dios! —exclamó cuando volvieron la esquina de King Street—, ¡Hay alguien sentado en la escalera de casa!

Así era: una figura envuelta en un capote, con un rebozo encima del capote y un sombrero de copa

coronándolo todo. No podía llevar allí mucho tiempo porque sólo estaba salpicado de nieve. El señor Povey se adelanta apresuradamente.

—¡Es el señor Scales, ni más ni menos! —dijo el señor Povey.

—¡El señor Scales! —exclamó la señora Baines.

Y Sofía, terriblemente asustada, murmuró:

—¡El señor Scales!

Tal vez le asustaban los milagros. El señor Scales, sentado en la puerta de su casa en medio de la nevosa noche, tenía toda la apariencia de un milagro, de algo visto en sueños, de algo imposible y patético de puro oportuno. Pero era un hecho tangible. Y años después, conociendo más al señor Scales, a Sofía llegó a parecerle lo más natural del mundo el que estuviera en la puerta. Los milagros de verdad nunca parecen milagros; lo que en el primer destello se asemeja a un milagro habitualmente resulta ser un ejemplo de lo más prosaico.

III

—¿Es usted, señora Baines? —inquirió Gerald Scales con una voz estúpida, levantando la vista y poniéndose a continuación en pie—. ¿Es ésta su casa? ¡Así que es su casa! Bueno, no tenía ni idea de que estaba en su puerta.

Sonrió tímidamente, no, vergonzosamente, mientras las mujeres y el señor Povey lo rodeaban a >n expresión de asombro a la luz de la lámpara de gas. Lo cierto es que estaba muy pálido.

—Pero ¿qué ocurre, señor Scales? —le preguntó la señora Baines en tono de preocupación—, ¿Está enfermo? ¿Es que de repente...?

—Oh, no —dijo el joven quitando importancia al asunto—. No es nada. Es que me han atacado allá abajo —y señaló al extremo de King Street.

—¡Atacado! —repitió la señora Baines, alarmada.

—¡Es el cuarto caso en una semana, que sepamos! —dijo el señor Povey—, Se está convirtiendo verdaderamente en un escándalo.

Acontecía que, debido a la depresión del comercio, el desempleo y el tiempo riguroso, la seguridad pública en las Cinco Ciudades no era en aquella época tan perfecta como debiera. Aguijoneadas por el hambre, las clases inferiores estaban olvidando sus modales, y ello a pesar de los altruistas y nobles esfuerzos de quienes eran socialmente superiores por aliviar la indigencia, debida, claro está, a imprevisión y cortedad de miras. ¿Cuándo —se preguntaban con desesperación quienes eran socialmente superiores— aprenderán las clases bajas a guardar para cuando venga un día de lluvia? (Podrían haber dicho un día de nieve y escarcha.) ¡Estaba en verdad «muy mal» por parte de las clases bajas, cuando se estaba haciendo por ellas cuanto se podía hacer, el que mataran la gallina de los huevos de oro! ¿Hasta dónde iban a llegar las cosas? Bien, pues ahí estaba el señor Gerald Scales, un caballero de Manchester, testigo y víctima de la deplorable condición moral de las Cinco Ciudades. ¿Qué iba a pensar de las Cinco Ciudades? El mal y el peligro habían constituido un tema de conversación en la tienda toda la semana anterior y ahora se les metía en casa.

—Espero que no le hayan... —dijo la señora Baines como disculpándose pero compasivamente.

—¡Oh, no! —el señor Scales la interrumpió desenfadadamente—. Conseguí rechazarlos. Sólo en el codo...

Mientras tanto seguía nevando.

—¡Vamos, entre! —le conminó la señora Baines.

—No quisiera molestarles —dijo el señor Scales—. Ahora estoy perfectamente y puedo irme al «Tigre».

—Tiene usted que entrar aunque no sea más que un minuto —insistió la señora Baines con decisión. Tenía que pensar en el honor de la ciudad.

—Es usted muy amable —dijo el señor Scales.

La puerta se abrió de pronto desde el interior y Maggie los examinó desde lo alto de los dos escalones.

—¡Feliz año nuevo, señora, a todos ustedes!

—Gracias, Maggie —respondió la señora Baines, añadiendo en tono cortés—: ¡Igualmente! —Y se dijo que como mejor podía Maggie probar su deseo de su feliz año nuevo era esforzándose en el futuro por no «ser chapucera y dejar sin limpiar los rincones» y no romper tanta loza.

Sofía, casi sin saber lo que hacía, subió los escalones.

—El señor Scales tiene que dejar entrar al año nuevo en casa, querida —la detuvo la señora Baines.

—¡Claro, madre! —asintió Sofía dando un respingo y retrocediendo nerviosamente.

El señor Scales saludó con el sombrero y, como es debido, dejó entrar al año nuevo y una gran cantidad de nieve en el vestíbulo de la señora Baines. Y allí, en la esterilla de la esquina, junto al armonio, los pies golpearon el suelo, se agitaron los paraguas y se sacudieron los abrigos y capotes. Y Maggie se llevó un montón de toda clase de cosas llenas de nieve, incluso chanclos, y recibió instrucciones de calentar leche y traer «pastelillos». El señor Povey exclamó:

—¡Brrr! —y cerró la puerta (que estaba bordeada de fieltro para impedir la ventilación); la señora Baines abrió el gas hasta que cantó y dijo a Sofía que atizara el fuego, y hasta le dijo a Constanza que encendiera la segunda lámpara de gas.

Se impuso un sentimiento de excitación.

La placidez de la existencia se había visto gratamente perturbada (sí, gratamente, a pesar del horror del ataque contra el codo del señor Scales) por una aventura. Además, resultó que el señor Scales iba de etiqueta. Y nadie había ido de etiqueta antes en aquella casa.

A Sofía le subió toda la sangre a la cara y allí se quedó, acentuando la vitalidad de su belleza. Se sentía mareada, presa de una extraña y desconcertante embriaguez. Le parecía hallarse en un mundo de irrealidades y cosas increíbles. Sus oídos percibían con claridad y los perfiles de personas y cosas tenían un colorido centelleante. Se hallaba en un estado de felicidad extática, irrazonable, inexplicable. Toda su desdicha, sus dudas, su desesperación, su rencor, su descortesía, habían desaparecido. Era tan suave y afable como Constanza. Sus ojos eran los de un cervatillo y sus gestos eran deliciosos con su gracia modesta y sensible. Constanza estaba en el sofá y ella, después de mirar a su alrededor como en busca de cobijo, se sentó al lado de su hermana. Trataba de no mirar al señor Scales, pero sus ojos no se apartaban de él. Estaba convencida de que era el hombre más perfecto del mundo. Más bien bajo quizá, pero perfecto. Que pudiera existir tal perfección era algo que casi no podía creer. Superaba todos sus sueños del hombre ideal. Su sonrisa, su voz, sus manos, su cabello..., ¡nunca hubo nada parecido! Pues cuando hablaba... ¡era música! Cuando sonreía... ¡era el cielo! Su sonrisa era para Sofía uno de esos fenómenos naturales tan encantadores que hacen sentir deseos de llorar. No hay hipérbole alguna en esta descripción de los sentimientos de Sofía; antes bien se queda corta. Estaba totalmente obsesionada con las cualidades únicas del señor Scales. Nada podría haberla convencido de que existiera ni pudiera existir entre los hombres un igual del señor Scales. Y era esta profunda e intensa convicción de su absoluta superioridad lo que le confería, allí sentado en la mecedora, en la sala de su madre, aquel aire irreal e increíble.

—Me había quedado en la ciudad con idea de ir a la fiesta de año nuevo del señor Lawton —estaba diciendo el señor Scales.

—¡Ah! ¡Entonces conoce usted al señor Lawton! —observó la señora Baines, impresionada, pues el abogado Lawton no se relacionaba con comerciantes. Era jovial con ellos y les llevaba sus asuntos legales, pero no era uno de ellos. Sus amigos venían de lejos.

—Mi familia y la suya se conocen de antiguo —dijo el señor Scales, tomándose la leche que había traído Maggie.

—Ahora, señor Scales, tiene que probar mis pastelillos. Un mes de felicidad por cada uno que se coma, ya lo sabe —le recordó la señora Baines.

Él hizo una inclinación.

—Y fue cuando me alejaba de aquí cuando me metí en dificultades —rió.

Entonces volvió a narrar la lucha, que no obstante había sido breve, ya que a los atacantes les faltó valor. Resbaló y cayó golpeándose el codo con el bordillo, y podía habérselo roto de no ser tan espesa la nieve. No; ya no le dolía; sin duda era una simple magulladura. Había sido una suerte que los bellacos no le ganaran la batalla, pues llevaba en la cartera una suma considerable en billetes, ¡cuentas pagadas! Muchas veces había pensado que sería una gran cosa que los viajantes de comercio pudieran llevar un perro, sobre todo en invierno. No había nada como un perro.

—¿Le gustan a usted los perros? —le preguntó el señor Povey, que siempre había tenido la ambición, secreta pero inviable, de tener un perro.

—Sí —contentó el señor Scales volviéndose hacia el señor Povey.

—¿Y tiene usted perro? —interrogó el señor Povey con interés de deportista.

—Tengo una perra foxterrier —dijo el señor Scales— que compré en Kuntsford, pero ya se está haciendo vieja.

El epíteto sexual sonó extraño en la estancia[33]. El señor Povey, que era un hombre de mundo, se condujo como si nada hubiera sucedido, pero los rizos de la señora Baines protestaron contra aquella innecesaria grosería. Constanza hizo como si no lo hubiera oído. Sofía, comprensiblemente, no lo oyó. El señor Scales no tenía ni idea de haber transgredido un convencionalismo en virtud del cual los perros no tienen sexo. Además, no tenía ni idea de la fama local de los pastelillos de la señora Baines. Ya llevaba comidos más de los que hubiera querido antes de empezar con los de ella, y la señora Baines echó de menos el entusiasmo que estaba habituada a ver en los consumidores de sus trabajos culinarios.

El señor Povey, fascinado, seguía con el tema de los perros; cada vez era más evidente que el señor Scales, que iba a fiestas vestido de etiqueta en vez de asistir a las vigilias nocturnas, que conocía a la gente de campanillas de la región y tenía perros de sexo inconveniente, no era un viajante de comercio corriente ni el tipo de hombre al que estaba acostumbrada la Plaza. Venía de un mundo diferente.

—La fiesta del abogado Lawton acabó temprano..., por lo menos, quiero decir, considerando... —la señora Baines vaciló.

Tras una pausa replicó el señor Scales:

—Sí; me fui nada más dar las doce. Mañana me espera un día agotador... quiero decir, hoy.

No eran horas para una visita prolongada; a los pocos minutos el señor Scales estaba ya preparado para marcharse. Reconoció sentir una cierta debilidad («flojera», la denominó en tono de broma, orgulloso de su dominio del dialecto) y ardor en el codo, pero por lo demás se encontraba perfectamente, gracias a la amabilísima hospitalidad de la señora Baines... En realidad no sabía cómo había ido a parar a su puerta. La señora Baines le conminó a que, si se topaba con un policía mientras se dirigía al «Tigre», le diera todos los detalles de la tentativa de atraco; él dijo que sin lugar a dudas así lo haría.

Se despidió con distinguida finura.

—Si puedo me pasaré un momento mañana por la mañana para que sepan que estoy bien —dijo, ya en la blanca calle.

—¡Oh, no deje de hacerlo! —dijo Constanza. Su perfecta inocencia la hacía ser extrañamente atrevida en ocasiones.

—¡Feliz año nuevo y que disfruten muchos más!

—¡Oh, gracias! ¡Igualmente! ¡Y no se pierda!

—Todo recto por la Plaza y la primera a la derecha —se hizo oír el sentido común del señor Povey.

Nada más quedaba por decir; el visitante desapareció silenciosamente en los torbellinos de nieve.

—¡Brrr! —murmuró el señor Povey cerrando la puerta. Todos pensaron: «¡Qué manera mas divertida de acabar el año viejo!».

—Sofía, corazón —llamó la señora Baines.

Pero Sofía se había ido a dormir.

—Dile lo del camisón nuevo —dijo la señora Baines a Constanza.

—Sí, mamá.

—No sé por qué me cae tan mal ese joven, al fin y al cabo —reflexionó en voz alta la señora Baines.

—¡Pero mamá! —protestó Constanza—. Yo creo que es muy agradable.

—Nunca mira directamente a la cara —dijo la señora Baines.

—¡A mí no me digas nada! —rió Constanza, dando a su madre un beso de buenas noches—. Te pones así porque no alabó tus pastelillos. Ya me di yo cuenta, ya.

IV

—Si alguien se cree que voy a estar más tiempo aquí con este frío, se equivoca —dijo Sofía a la mañana siguiente en voz muy alta y estando cerca su madre. Y bajó a la tienda con unos gorros.

Fingía estar enfadada, pero no lo estaba. Por el contrario, se sentía llena de júbilo y caritativa con todo el mundo. En general se esforzaba por mantenerse apartada de la tienda; en general tenía un aire severo y reconcentrado. Por ello, su presencia en el piso bajo y su conducta despertaron el interés de las tres jóvenes dependientas que estaban sentadas cosiendo alrededor de la estufa, en medio de la tienda, cobijadas por el gran montón de tela de camisas que ocultaba la entrada.

Sofía compartía el rincón de Constanza. Tenían ladrillos calientes bajo los pies y chales de punto fino sobre los hombros. Habrían estado mejor cerca de la estufa, pero la grandeza tiene su castigo. El tiempo era excepcionalmente crudo. Las ventanas estaban cubiertas de gruesa escarcha, de manera que el arte del señor Povey como escaparatista era inútil. Y —¡raro fenómeno!—las puertas de la tienda estaban cerradas. Habitualmente estaban no sólo abiertas sino, además, tapadas por una exhibición de «surtido barato». El señor Povey, tras consultar a la señora Baines, había decidido cerrarlas, renunciando a la acostumbrada exposición. El señor Povey también había ayudado personalmente, con el fin de entrar en calor, a dos trabajadores contratados para quitar la espesa capa de nieve helada de la acera y llevaba puestos sus mitones de cabritilla. Todas aquellas cosas juntas eran mejor prueba que el testimonio de los barómetros del frío que hacía.

Sobre las diez apareció el señor Scales. En vez de acudir al mostrador del señor Povey se dirigió atrevidamente al rincón de Constanza y atisbo por encima de las cajas, sonriendo y saludando. Las dos muchachas estuvieron sinceramente encantadas con la visita; las dos se ruborizaron, las dos se rieron... sin saber por qué se reían. El señor Scales dijo que se marchaba ya y que sólo se asomaba un momento para agradecerles toda su amabilidad de la pasada noche, «o, mejor dicho, de esta mañana». Las jóvenes rieron de nuevo por aquella ocurrencia. No se podía decir nada más simple, pero a ellas les pareció mágicamente atractivo. Entró un cliente, una señora; una de las dependientas se puso en pie y abandonó la proximidad de la estufa, pero las hijas de la casa hicieron caso omiso de la clienta; era parte de la etiqueta de la tienda que los clientes, al menos los clientes casuales, no existieran para las hijas de la casa hasta que una dependienta reclamase formalmente su atención para ellos. De otro modo, cualquiera que quisiera un penique de cinta pretendería ser atendido por la señorita Baines o por la señorita Sofía, si la señorita Sofía se encontrara allí, y eso sería ridículo.

Sofía, echando una mirada de reojo, vio a la dependienta parlamentando con la clienta; entonces la dependienta pasó sin hacer ruido detrás del mostrador y se acercó al rincón.

—Señorita Constanza, ¿puede venir un minuto? —susurró discretamente.

Constanza apagó la sonrisa dirigida al señor Scales y, apartándose, encendió otra inferior y completamente distinta para la clienta.

—Buenos días, señorita Baines. ¡Qué frío!, ¿verdad?

—Buenos días, señora Chatterley. Sí, ya lo creo. Me imagino que está preocupada por esos... —Constanza se detuvo.

Sofía se había quedado sola con el señor Scales, pues para discutir libremente acerca de lo innombrable con la señora Chatterley su hermana se había retirado al extremo del mostrador. Sofía había soñado con una conversación privada con el señor Scales como algo delicioso e imposible. Pero la suerte la había favorecido. Estaba a solas con él. Y el hermoso cabello rubio del joven, sus ojos azules y su boca delicada eran tan maravillosos para ella como siempre. Era caballeroso hasta un punto que la impresionaba más que nada en toda su vida. Y todo el instinto orgulloso y aristocrático que constituía la base de su carácter saltó y se apoderó de su caballerosidad como un animal famélico que se apoderase de su comida.

—La última vez que la vi —dijo el señor Scales en un tono diferente— me dijo que no estaba nunca en la tienda.

—¿Qué? ¿Ayer? ¿Dije eso?

—No; quiero decir la última vez que la vi a solas —dijo él.

—¡Oh! Es accidental.

—Eso es exactamente lo que me dijo la última vez.

—¿Sí?

¿Eran sus modales o lo que dijo lo que la hizo sentirse halagada, lo que hizo más intensa su hermosa vivacidad?

—No saldrá usted mucho, ¿no?

—¿Qué? ¿Con este tiempo?

—Normalmente.

—Voy a la iglesia —repuso ella— y a la compra con mamá. —Hubo una pequeña pausa—. Y a la biblioteca pública.

—Ah, sí. Tienen ustedes aquí una biblioteca pública, ¿verdad?

—Sí. Desde hace un año.

—¿Y es socia de ella? ¿Qué lee usted?

—Oh, relatos, ya sabe. Saco un libro una vez a la semana.

—Los sábados, ¿no?

—No —dijo ella—, los miércoles —y sonrió—. Habitualmente.

—Hoy es miércoles —añadió él—, ¿No ha ido aún?

Ella sacudió la cabeza.

—No creo que vaya hoy. Hace demasiado frío. No creo que me arriesgue a salir hoy.

—Le debe de gustar a usted mucho leer —dijo él.

Entonces apareció el señor Povey frotándose las manos enfundadas en mitones. Y la señora Chatterley se marchó.

—Voy a buscar a mamá —dijo Constanza.

La señora Baines fue muy cortés con el joven. Éste relató su entrevista con el policía, cuya opinión era que le había atacado algún miembro disperso de una banda de Hanbridge. Las jóvenes dependientas, aguzando el oído, dedujeron el carácter de la aventura del señor Scales y se sintieron tan intrigadas que interrogaron al señor Povey sobre ella cuando el señor Scales se hubo marchado. Su despedida estuvo marcada por numerosos apretones de manos y, al final, el señor Povey salió corriendo a la Plaza detrás de él para decirle algo que tenía que ver con perros.

A la una y media, mientras la señora Baines dormitaba después de comer, Sofía se abrigó bien y con un libro bajo el brazo salió al mundo atravesando la tienda. Volvió al cabo de menos de veinte minutos. Pero su madre ya se había despertado y andaba rondando la parte de atrás de la tienda. Las madres tienen dones sobrenaturales.

Sofía pasó por delante de ella con aire despreocupado y entró a toda prisa en la sala, donde dejó caer su manguito y un libro y se arrodilló delante de la chimenea para calentarse.

La señora Baines la siguió.

—¿Has ido a la biblioteca? —le preguntó.

—Sí, mamá. Y es como para morirse.

—No comprendo cómo has salido con semejante día. ¿No ibas siempre los jueves?

—Sí, pero había terminado el libro.

—¿De qué es ése? —La señora Baines recogió el volumen, que estaba cubierto de hule negro.

Lo recogió con expresión hostil. Su actitud hacia la biblioteca pública era de oscura enemistad. Ella, con excepción del *Domingo en casa,* nunca leía nada, y Constanza nunca leía nada con excepción del *Domingo en casa.* En la estantería del salón había comentarios bíblicos, el *índice Geográfico* de Dugdale, el *Herbario* de Culpepper y obras de Bunyan y Flavio Josefo; también *La cabaña del tío Tom.* Y la señora Baines, teniendo en cuenta el bienestar de sus hijas, miraba con recelo el resto de la literatura impresa. Si la biblioteca pública no formase parte del famoso Instituto Wedgwood, inaugurado con éxito clamoroso por el divino Gladstone; si el primer libro no lo hubiese «sacado» ceremoniosamente el jefe de alguaciles en persona —un abuelo de renombre sin tacha—, la señora Baines hubiera arriesgado probablemente su autoridad para prohibir la biblioteca pública.

—No tienes por qué tener miedo —dijo Sofía, riendo— Es *La experiencia de la vida,* de la señorita Sewell.

—Una novela, ya lo veo —dijo la señora Baines soltando el libro.

Ni el oro y las joyas tentarían quizá a una Sofía de esta época para que leyese *La experiencia de la vida,* pero para Sofía Baines la insulsa narración tenía el estímulo de lo desaprobado.

Al día siguiente la señora Baines llamó a Sofía a su habitación.

—Sofía —dijo, estremeciéndose—, me gustaría que no te pasearas por las calles con jóvenes hasta que tengas mi permiso.

La muchacha enrojeció violentamente.

—Yo... yo...

—Te vieron en Wedgwood Street —dijo la señora Baines.

—¿Quién te ha venido con chismorreos? El señor Critchlow, ¿verdad? —inquirió Sofía despectivamente.

—Nadie me ha venido con «chismorreos» —repuso la señora Baines.

—Bueno, si me encuentro con alguien por casualidad por la calle no puedo evitarlo, ¿no? —La voz de Sofía temblaba.

—Ya sabes lo que quiero decir, hija mía —dijo la señora Baines, con esmerada calma.

Sofía, enojada, salió a toda prisa de la habitación.

—¡Pues no está mal eso de que le esperaba «un día agotador»! —reflexionó irónicamente la señora Baines recordando una frase que se le había quedado en la cabeza. Y muy vagamente, con una inquietud apenas perceptible, recordó que «él» y nadie más había estado en la tienda el día de la muerte de su esposo.

Capítulo VI

UNA ESCAPADA

I

La inquietud de la señora Baines creció y decreció en el transcurso de los tres meses siguientes, influida por el humor de Sofía. Había días en que era la antigua Sofía, la Sofía adusta, difícil, susceptible y poco considerada. Pero había otros en los que parecía extraer alegría, regocijo y benevolencia de alguna fuente secreta, de alguna fuente cuya naturaleza y origen nadie podía adivinar. Era en esos días cuando aumentaba la inquietud de la señora Baines. Tenía las sospechas más disparatadas; casi era capaz de acusar a Sofía de mantener una correspondencia clandestina; veía a Sofía y a Gerald Scales profunda y malvadamente enamorados; los veía rodeando cada uno con sus brazos el cuello del otro... ¡Y entonces se decía que era una tonta de mediana edad, que fundaba todo aquel andamiaje en un breve encuentro en la calle y en una idea, una fantasía, una curiosa e irracional ocurrencia! Sofía poseía una cierta veta de pura nobleza en aquel carácter suyo tan heterogéneo. Además, la señora Baines vigilaba el correo y vigilaba también a Sofía —no era el tipo de mujer que confiara en una veta de pura nobleza— y llegó a estar segura de que el pecado de Sofía, si es que existía, no era tan grave como para pesarlo en la balanza o hacerse con él furtivamente y ponérselo delante de pronto a la muchacha en una bandeja.

Sin embargo habría dado cualquier cosa por ver qué había dentro de la linda cabeza de Sofía. ¡Ah! ¡Si hubiera podido hacerlo, qué maravillas, causantes de insomnio, habría presenciado! ¡Qué brillantes lámparas ardiendo en las misteriosas grutas y cavernas de aquel cerebro habrían deslumbrado sus maduros ojos! Sofía vivió durante meses de la ardiente e inagotable vitalidad que había absorbido en dos mágicos minutos en Wedgwood Street. Vivía sobre todo del llameante fuego que había encendido en su alma el ver a Gerald Scales en el pórtico del Instituto Wedgwood cuando salía de la biblioteca pública con *La experiencia de la vida* dentro de su gran manguito de astracán. Se había quedado para verla, pues: ¡lo sabía! «¡Al fin y al cabo —dijo su corazón—, debo de ser muy hermosa, pues he atraído a la perla de los hombres!». Y recordaba su rostro en el espejo. El valor y el poder de la belleza se le habían puesto de manifiesto con enorme fuerza. ¡Él, el gran hombre de mundo, el hombre apuesto y elegante con mil extraños amigos y mil intereses muy alejados de ella, se había quedado en Bursley sólo para tener oportunidad de verla! Estaba orgullosa, pero su orgullo se ahogó en dicha. «Estaba mirando la inscripción sobre Gladstone». «¡Así que decidió salir como de costumbre!». «Y ¿puedo preguntarle qué libro ha elegido?». Éstas fueron las frases que oyó y a las cuales respondió con otras similares. Y entre tanto se había abierto un milagro de éxtasis, se había abierto como una flor. Recorrió Wedgwood Street a su lado, lentamente, por la irregular acera, en la que seguía habiendo marmóreos bulbos de nieve que habían desafiado a la pala. Los dos tenían exactamente la misma estatura; no dejaban de mirarse a la cara el uno al otro. Éste fue todo el milagro. ¡Salvo que ella no caminaba por la acera: caminaba por la intangible alfombra de césped del paraíso! ¡Salvo que las casas habían retrocedido y desaparecido y los transeúntes se habían vuelto sutiles hasta convertirse en fantasmas imperceptibles! ¡Salvo que su madre y Constanza se habían convertido en seres fantasmales que existían a una inmensa distancia!

¿Qué había sucedido? ¡Nada! ¡Lo más vulgar del mundo! La causa eterna había elegido a un viajante de comercio (podría haber sido un empleado o un clérigo, pero lo cierto es que fue un viajante de comercio), le había dotado de todos los gloriosos, únicos e increíbles atributos de un dios y lo había colocado ante Sofía para producir el eterno efecto. ¡Un milagro realizado especialmente en beneficio de Sofía! Nadie más en Wegdwood Street vio al dios andando a su lado. Nadie más vio otra cosa que un simple viajante de comercio. ¡Sí, lo más vulgar del mundo!

Naturalmente, en la esquina de la calle él tuvo que marcharse. «¡Hasta la próxima vez!», murmuró. Y de sus ojos salió un fuego que encendió en la linda cabeza de Sofía aquellas lámparas cuya visión, misericordiosamente, se le ahorraba a la señora Baines. Y él le estrechó la mano y la saludó con el sombrero. ¡Imagínense, un dios saludando con el sombrero! Y se fue andando con dos piernas, exactamente igual que un pequeño y osado viajante de comercio.

Y, acompañada por el ambiguo Ángel de los Eclipses, ella dio la vuelta a la esquina de King Street, compuso su fisonomía y valerosamente se enfrentó con su madre. Ésta no había percibido en un principio ¿o inhabitual, pues las madres, pese a su fama en contrario, son en realidad los seres más ciegos que existen. ¡Sofía, la muy inocentona, se había imaginado que el que recorriera cien yardas de acera con un dios a su lado

no iba a suscitar comentarios! ¡Qué engaño! Cierto es, sí, que nadie vio al dios directamente. Pero las mejillas de Sofía, sus ojos, la curva de su cuello al tenderse su alma anhelante hacia el alma del dios, aquellos fenómenos eran mucho más llamativos de lo que Sofía se figuraba. Una versión de ellos, en forma modificada por respeto a la conocida dignidad de la señora Baines, había curado a la madre de su ceguera y había dado lugar a aquella típica protesta suya: «Me gustaría que no te pasearas por las calles con jóvenes», etc.

Cuando llegó el momento de la reaparición del señor Scales, la señora Baines se trazó un plan; cuando llegó al buzón la circular que anunciaba la hora exacta de su visita, lo formuló en detalle. En primer lugar estaba resuelta a estar indispuesta y no visible, de modo que el señor Scales se viera frustrado en cualquier posible intento de reanudar las relaciones sociales en la sala. En segundo lugar, engatusó a Constanza con una simple indirecta —¡oh, vaga y breve en extremo! —y Constanza comprendió que no debía abandonar la tienda la mañana fijada. En tercer lugar, se inventó una manera de explicar al señor Povey que no había que mencionar la inminente llegada del señor Scales. Y en cuarto lugar, señaló deliberadamente cita para Sofía con dos clientas de sombrerería en el entresuelo a fin de que Sofía estuviese aprisionada en éste.

No habiendo pues dejado nada al azar, se dijo que era una estúpida y que no pensaba más que tonterías. Pero ello no impidió que apretase los labios con firmeza y decidiese que el señor Scales no iba a meter baza en su familia. Había recabado del abogado Pratt información acerca del señor Scales. Más aún, planteó la cuestión de una forma más general: ¿es que acaso hay que permitir que una muchacha se interese por un joven, sea el que fuere? La eterna finalidad había hecho uso de la señora Baines y la había abandonado y, como la mayoría de las personas en una situación similar, estaba muy a mal, de manera inconsciente y totalmente sincera, con la eterna finalidad.

II

El día de la visita del señor Scales a la tienda para tomar los pedidos y hacer los cobros en nombre de Birkinshaws, un suceso singular vino a dar al traste con las maquinaciones de la señora Baines. En el señor Scales, la puntualidad no era un hábito inveterado; raras veces se había visto que en el pasado cumpliera con exactitud la profecía del aviso referente a su llegada. Pero aquella mañana su prontitud no tuvo parangón. Entró en la tienda y casualmente estaba el señor Povey en la puerta colocando pantalones de franela inencogible. Los dos menudos jóvenes charlaron afablemente acerca de pantalones, perros y el vencimiento trimestral (que acababa de pasar) y después el señor Povey condujo al señor Scales a su pupitre, en el oscuro rincón detrás de la alta pila de piezas de sarga, y pagó la cuenta trimestral en billetes y oro, como siempre; luego el señor Scales ofreció a la inspección del señor Povey todo lo que Manchester había inventado recientemente para tentación de las tienda de moda y el señor Povey le hizo un encargo que, si no llegaba a ser temerario, estaba más cerca de lo «espléndido» que de lo «bueno». Durante el proceso el señor Scales tuvo que salir de la tienda dos o tres veces para traer de su carretilla, que había dejado junto al bordillo de la acera, ciertas pequeñas cajas negras con borde de latón. En ninguna de estas incursiones miró el señor Scales en torno suyo para satisfacer licenciosamente la concupiscencia de los ojos. Aun cuando se hubiera permitido esta libertad no habría visto nada más interesante que a tres jóvenes dependientas sentadas alrededor de la estufa cosiendo y pinchándose los dedos, de los cuales empezaban por fin los sabañones a decidirse a desaparecer. Cuando el señor Scales hubo acabado de tomar nota de los detalles del pedido con su pluma de marfil y volvió a empaquetar sus cajas, puso fin a la entrevista a la manera de un competente viajante de comercio, es decir, inculcó al señor Povey la idea de que éste era un hombre sabio, astuto y recto y que el mundo iría mucho mejor si hubiera más como él. Preguntó por la señora Baines y mostró profundo pesar al saber de su indisposición, hallando no obstante consuelo al ser enterado de que las señoritas Baines se encontraban bien. Estaba el señor Povey a punto de acompañar al modelo de los viajantes de comercio a la puerta cuando entraron a la vez dos clientas. Una se dirigió sin más hacia el señor Povey, con lo cual el señor Scales se retiró de inmediato, pues es una máxima universal en las tiendas que ni siquiera el más distinguido de los comerciantes debe obstaculizar las transacciones de ni siquiera el menos distinguido de los dientes. La otra clienta fue causa de que Constanza se asomara de su rincón claustral. Constanza llevaba allí todo el rato, pero, naturalmente, aunque oía la conocida voz, su pudor virginal no le permitía dejarse ver por el señor Scales.

Al marcharse éste la vio, con su agradable nariz respingona y sus ojos de mirada amable y sencilla. Estaba invitando a la segunda clienta a subir al entresuelo, donde estaba la señorita Sofía. El señor Scales vaciló un instante y en ese momento Constanza, cuya mirada se encontró con la suya, le sonrió y le saludó con la cabeza. ¿Qué otra cosa podía hacer? Aunque tenía una vaga idea de que a su madre no le «caía bien» el

señor Scales e incluso temía la posible influencia del joven sobre Sofía, no podía excluirlo de su benevolencia general hacia el universo. Además, le agradaba; le agradaba mucho y lo tenía por un magnífico ejemplar de hombre.

Él se apartó de la puerta y se acercó a ella. Se estrecharon la mano e inmediatamente se pusieron a conversar, pues Constanza, aun conservando toda su modestia, en la tienda había perdido toda su timidez y podía charlar con todo el mundo. Se deslizó hacia su rincón, exactamente como había hecho Sofía en otra ocasión, y el señor Scales puso la barbilla sobre la pantalla de cajas y continuó ansiosamente la conversación.

No había en el hecho mismo de la conversación nada en absoluto que pudiera ser motivo de alarma para una madre, nada que hiciese inútiles las precauciones de la señora Baines por la flor de la inocencia de Sofía. Y sin embargo tenía peligro para la señora Baines, inconsciente de todo en su sala. La señora Baines podía confiar enteramente en que Constanza no se dejaría extraviar por los encantos de *dandy* del señor Scales (sabía en qué dirección le soplaba el viento a Constanza); en sus planes no se había olvidado de nada, excepto del señor Povey; y hay que decir que no era posible que previera los efectos que tendría en la situación el carácter del señor Povey.

Éste, mientras atendía a la clienta, había reparado en la luminosa sonrisa de Constanza al viajante y a su corazón no le gustó. Y cuando vio los vivos gestos de un señor Scales aparentemente sumergido en íntimo coloquio con una Constanza escondida detrás de las cajas, su inquietud se convirtió en furia. Era un hombre capaz de ciegas y terribles furias. En apariencia insignificante, poseedor de una mente tan pequeña como su cuerpo y que se humillaba fácilmente, era con todo un joven muy susceptible, que a la mínima se sentía ofendido y era orgulloso, vanidoso y secretamente apasionado. Uno podía ofenderle sin darse cuenta y no descubrir el pecado hasta que el señor Povey hubiera hecho algo demasiado decisivo como consecuencia de ello.

La razón de su furia eran los celos. El señor Povey había progresado mucho desde la muerte de John Baines. Había consolidado su posición *y* era en todos los aspectos un personaje de primerísima importancia. Su desdicha era que no podía traducir su importancia, o su sentimiento de importancia, en términos de comportamiento externo. La mayoría de la gente, si le hubieran dicho que el señor Povey aspiraba seriamente a entrar en la familia Baines, se habría reído. Reírse del señor Povey era invariablemente una equivocación. Constanza era la única que sabía lo que había avanzado por lo que a ella se refería.

Se fue la clienta pero el señor Scales no lo hizo. El señor Povey, libre para reconocer el terreno, lo hizo. Desde la sombra de la caja registradora obtuvo vislumbres del rostro ruboroso y vivaz de Constanza. Estaba visiblemente absorta en el señor Scales. Ella y él mostraban una enorme intimidad. Y el murmullo de su charla continuaba. Aquella charla no era nada ni versaba sobre nada, pero el señor Povey se imaginó que estaban intercambiando eternos juramentos. Aguantó la odiosa libertad del señor Scales hasta que le resultó insoportable, hasta que le arrebató el dominio de sí mismo; entonces se retiró a su taller de cortar. Allí se puso a meditar en estado de demencia por espacio quizá de un minuto e ideó una estratagema. Volvió apresuradamente a la tienda y dijo con voz fuerte y tono cortante:

—Señorita Baines, su madre quiere que vaya inmediatamente. Estaba ya a mitad de la frase cuando vio que, durante su ausencia, Sofía había bajado del salón de exhibición y se había reunido con su hermana y el señor Scales. Vio que el peligro y el escándalo eran ahora menores, pero se alegró de hacer salir a Constanza, y no se hallaba en estado de apreciar las posibles consecuencias.

Los tres charlatanes, sobresaltados, miraron al señor Povey, que salió de la tienda bruscamente. Constanza pensó que no podía hacer nada más que acudir a la llamada.

Se encontró con él en la puerta del taller de cortar, en el pasillo que conducía a la sala.

—¿Dónde está mamá? ¿En la sala? —preguntó inocentemente Constanza.

Un intenso rubor apareció en el rostro del señor Povey.

—Si quiere saberlo —dijo con voz dura—, no ha preguntado por usted ni la ha llamado.

Le volvió la espalda y se replegó a su guarida.

—Entonces, ¿qué...? —empezó ella, desconcertada.

Él se le plantó delante.

—¿No ha estado bastante rato cuchicheando con ese petimetre? —le espetó. Tenía lágrimas en los ojos.

Constanza, aunque sin experiencia en aquellos asuntos, comprendió. Comprendió perfecta e inmediatamente. Tendría que haber puesto al señor Povey en su sitio. Tendría que haber protestado con firmeza y dignidad, de modo tajante, contra un ultraje tan ridículo y monstruoso como el cometido por el señor Povey. Éste tendría que haber quedado arruinado para siempre en su estimación y en su corazón. Pero vaciló.

—Y hace nada, el domingo pasado... por la tarde —balbuceó el señor Povey.

(No es que hubiera ocurrido o se hubiera dicho nada claramente entre ellos el domingo anterior por la tarde. Pero habían estado solos y cada uno de ellos había visto cosas extrañas y perturbadoras en los ojos del otro.)

Brotaron repentinamente lágrimas de los ojos de Constanza.

—Debería estar avergonzado —tartamudeó.

A ella se le seguían saltando las lágrimas y a él también. Lo que el uno o la otra dijeron, por lo tanto, era de importancia secundaria.

La señora Baines, que venía de la cocina y oyó hablar a Constanza, irrumpió en la escena, que la redujo al silencio. A veces los padres se ven reducidos al silencio. Encontró a Sofía y al señor Scales en la tienda.

III

Aquella tarde, Sofía, demasiado ocupada con sus propios asuntos para notar algo anormal en las relaciones entre su madre y Constanza y totalmente ignorante de que hubiera habido un fracasado complot contra ella, fue a visitar a la señorita Chetwynd, de quien seguía siendo muy amiga: consideraba que ella y la señorita Chetwynd formaban una aristocracia intelectual y la familia lo admitía tácitamente. No hizo ningún secreto de su salida de la tienda; se limitó a vestirse y se fue, preparada en cualquier momento para decirle a su madre, si ésta la pillaba y preguntaba, que iba a ver a la señorita Chetwynd. Y efectivamente fue a ver a la señorita Chetwynd; llegó a la casa-escuela, que estaba entre árboles, junto al camino de Tumhill, justo pasada la barrera de peaje, exactamente a las cuatro y cuarto. Como las alumnas de la señorita Chetwynd salían a las cuatro y la señorita Chetwynd daba invariablemente un paseo después, Sofía pudo contener su sorpresa al ser informada de que la señorita Chetwynd no estaba en casa. Ella *no* pretendía que la señorita Chetwynd estuviera en casa.

Torció a la derecha saliendo al camino lateral, que empezaba en la barrera de peaje e iba hacia Moorthorne y Red Cow, dos aldeas mineras. Su corazón latía de temor cuando empezó a andar por aquel camino, pues había emprendido una terrible aventura. Lo que más la atemorizaba era quizá su propia y asombrosa audacia. La alarmaba algo en su interior que parecía no formar parte de ella y le producía curiosas, desconcertantes y pasajeras impresiones de irrealidad.

Por la mañana había oído la voz del señor Scales desde el entresuelo; aquella voz cuyo murmullo, aun lejano, le hizo sentir escalofríos en la espalda. Y se había situado en el mostrador delante de la ventana para poder mirar hacia la Plaza perpendicularmente; al hacerlo vio la parte de arriba de su equipaje en una carretilla y por un momento de la copa de su sombrero cuando salió de la tienda para tentar al señor Povey. Podía haber bajado a la tienda; no había razón alguna para que no lo hiciera; habían pasado tres meses desde que se mencionara el nombre del señor Scales y era evidente que su madre había olvidado el nimio incidente del día de año nuevo... ¡pero era incapaz de bajar la escalera! Fue a lo alto de ella y atisbo por entre la balaustrada; no pudo ir más lejos. Durante casi cien días habían ardido luminosamente en su cabeza aquellas extraordinarias lámparas; ahora había vuelto el que le daba la luz y sus pies no querían ir a su encuentro; ahora había llegado el único momento para el cual vivía ¡y no podía atraparlo al pasar! «¿Por qué no bajo? —se preguntó—, ¿Es que tengo miedo de encontrarme con él?».

La clienta enviada por Constanza había ocupado la superficie de su vida durante diez minutos probándose sombreros; ella había pasado aquel tiempo rezando como una loca para que el señor Scales no se marchara y diciéndose que era imposible que se fuera sin preguntar al menos por ella. ¿No había estado contando los días en espera de aquél? Cuando la clienta se fue, Sofía la siguió escaleras abajo y vio al señor Scales charlando con Constanza. Recuperó al instante todo su dominio de sí misma y se unió a ellos con una

sonrisa notablemente burlona. Después de que la llamada del señor Povey hubiera hecho que Constanza se retirara del rincón, el tono del señor Scales había cambiado; la había encantado. «¡Usted es *usted* —dijo—; está usted... y el resto del universo!». Entonces ¡no la había olvidado; ella vivía en su corazón; no había sido víctima de sus propias fantasías durante tres meses!... Vio que ponía un papel blanco doblado en lo alto de la pantalla de cajas y se lo echaba. Enrojeció violentamente mientras lo contemplaba encima del mostrador, donde había caído. Él no dijo nada y ella no podía hablar... ¡Así pues, tenía preparado ese papel de antemano, por si podía dárselo! Este pensamiento era exquisito pero la llenaba de terror. «¡Ahora tengo que irme!», había dicho él, sin convicción y con voz emocionada, y se había ido ¡así! Y ella se había guardado el papel en el bolsillo del delantal y de había marchado apresuradamente. Ni siquiera vio a su madre en pie junto a la caja registradora, aquel sitio que era la torre de mando de toda la tienda. Corrió y corrió sin aliento a su habitación...

«¡Soy una chica mala! —se dijo con toda franqueza cuando acudía a la cita—. Es un sueño verlo otra vez. No puede ser verdad. Aún estoy a tiempo de volver. Si vuelvo estoy salvada. Simplemente he venido a visitar a la señorita Chetwynd y no estaba; nadie puede decir una palabra. Pero si sigo..., ¡si me ven! ¡Qué estúpida seré si sigo!».

Y siguió, impulsada, entre otras cosas, por una inmensa e ingenua curiosidad y por la vanidad que la misma nota había suscitado en ella. En aquella época se estaba construyendo el ferrocarril y en la zanja había cientos de peones trabajando entre Bursley y Turnhill. Cuando llegó al puente nuevo sobre el desmonte, él estaba allí, como decía en la nota.

Estaban muy nerviosos; se saludaron con rigidez, como si se hubieran conocido aquel día. No se habló de la nota ni de cómo había reaccionado Sofía a ella. Ambos se comportaron como si el que ella estuviera allí fuese un hecho básico de la situación que no debían perturbar con comentarios. Sofía no podía ocultar su vergüenza, pero ésta no hizo sino acentuar el punzante encanto de su belleza. Llevaba un sombrero rígido de amazona con un velo recogido, lo último en la moda de primavera en las Cinco Ciudades; su rostro, acariciado por la fresca brisa, mostraba un color sonrosado; sus ojos centelleaban bajo el oscuro sombrero, y los intensos colores del vestido Victoriano —verde y carmesí —no lograban anular el de aquellas mejillas. Si bajaba la mirada al suelo, con el ceño fruncido, estaba todavía más adorable. Él había descendido por la pendiente arcillosa, desde el rojo puente inacabado, para ir a su encuentro; cuando concluyeron los saludos se quedaron callados, él aparentemente contemplando el horizonte y ella la marga amarilla que bordeaba sus botas. El encuentro estuvo tan lejos del ideal que se había forjado Sofía como Venecia de Manchester.

—¡Así que éste es el nuevo ferrocarril! —dijo ella.

—Sí —dijo él—. Éste es su nuevo ferrocarril. Se ve mejor desde el puente.

—Pero hay mucho barro ahí arriba —objetó ella haciendo un mohín.

—Un poco más allá está totalmente seco —la tranquilizó él.

Desde el puente tuvieron de repente la panorámica de un profundo tajo en la tierra; se arrastraban por él centenares de hombres afanándose en menudas operaciones, como moscas en una enorme herida. Había un continuo ruido de picos que asemejaba un tamborileo amortiguado de granizo; en la distancia, una locomotora diminuta conducía una procesión de vagones diminutos.

—¡Y ésos son los peones! —murmuró Sofía.

Las cosas indescriptibles que hacían los peones en las Cinco Ciudades habían llegado incluso hasta ella: ¡que estaban los domingos todo el día bebiendo y jurando, que sus casas y cabañas eran antros de la más horrenda infamia, que eran la maldición de una región respetable y temerosa de Dios! Ella y Gerald Scales contemplaron a aquellos peligrosos animales de presa con sus pantalones de pana amarilla y sus camisas abiertas que dejaban ver el velludo pecho. Sin duda ambos pensaron en lo inconveniente que es que los ferrocarriles no se puedan crear sin la ayuda de tan repugnantes y canallescas bestias. Las contemplaron desde la altura de su pulcro decoro y sintieron la poderosa atracción de los modales superiores. Los modales de los peones eran tales que ni Sofía podía verlos ni Gerald permitir que ella los viese sin rubor.

Unidos en el rubor se apartaron, subiendo la pendiente. Sofía ya no sabía lo que hacía. Durante unos minutos estuvo tan indefensa como si estuviese en un globo con él.

—Acabé pronto el trabajo —dijo él, añadiendo con complacencia—: Lo cierto es que he tenido un día estupendo.

Sofía se tranquilizó al saber que él no estaba descuidando sus obligaciones. Andar coqueteando con un

viajante de comercio que ha concluido un buen día de trabajo parecía menos escandaloso que los devaneos con alguien que descuida el negocio; incluso, en comparación, parecía respetable.

—Debe de ser muy interesante —dijo cortésmente.

—¿El qué, mi oficio?

—Sí. Estar siempre viendo sitios nuevos y todo eso.

—En cierto modo lo es —admitió él juiciosamente—. Pero puedo decirle que era mucho más agradable estar en París.

—¡Oh! ¿Ha estado en París?

—Viví allí casi dos años —dijo como sin darle importancia. Después, mirándola—: ¿No se dio cuenta de que estuve mucho tiempo sin venir?

—No sabía que estuviera en París —respondió ella, evasiva.

—Fui a empezar una especie de agencia de Birkinshaws —explicó él.

—Me imagino que hablará francés perfectamente.

—Desde luego, es necesario saber francés —dijo él—. Lo aprendí de niño con una gobernanta —mi tío me obligó a ello —pero lo olvidé casi por completo en el colegio, y en la universidad nunca se aprende nada..., ¡muy poco, en todo caso! ¡Desde luego, francés no!

Sofía estaba muy impresionada. Era un personaje mucho más sensacional de lo que suponía. Nunca se le hubiera ocurrido que los viajantes de comercio tuvieran que ir a la universidad a terminar su compleja educación. ¡Y luego, París! París no significaba para ella otra cosa que lo novelesco en estado puro, imposible, inalcanzable. ¡Y él había estado allí! Nubes de gloria lo circundaban. Era un héroe, era deslumbrante. Había acudido a ella desde otro mundo. Era su milagro. Era casi demasiado milagroso para ser verdad.

¡Ella pasando su monótona vida en la tienda! ¡Y él, elegante, brillante, viviendo en lejanas ciudades! ¡Los dos juntos, uno al lado del otro, paseando por el camino, hacia la loma de Moorthorne! No había nada semejante en los relatos de la señorita Sewell.

—¿Su tío...? —interrogó ella vagamente.

—Sí, el señor Boldero. Es socio de Birkinshaws.

—¡Ah!

—¿Ha oído hablar de él? Es un gran wesleyano.

—Oh, sí —repuso ella—. Cuando tuvimos la Conferencia Wesleyana aquí, él...

—Está muy bien siempre en las conferencias —dijo Gerald Scales.

—No sabía que tuviera relación con Birkinshaws.

—No es un socio trabajador, claro —aclaró el señor Scales— Pero quiere que yo lo sea. Tengo que aprender el negocio desde abajo. Ahora comprenderá usted por qué soy viajante.

—Ya veo —contestó ella, todavía más impresionada.

—Soy huérfano —dijo Gerald—. Y el tío Boldero se ocupó de mí cuando yo tenía tres años.

—¡Ya veo! —repitió ella.

Le parecía raro que el señor Scales fuera wesleyano, igual que ella. Hubiera asegurado que pertenecía a «la Iglesia». Sus ideas sobre el wesleyanismo, al igual que sus ideas sobre otras varias cosas, se modificaron profundamente.

—Ahora háble me de usted —sugirió el señor Scales.

—¡Oh! ¡Yo no soy nada! —estalló Sofía.

La exclamación era totalmente sincera. Las revelaciones del señor Scales acerca de sí mismo le resultaban apasionantes pero al mismo tiempo desalentadoras.

—Es usted la muchacha más refinada que he conocido en mi vida —dijo el señor Scales con énfasis galante, y clavó el bastón en la blanda tierra.

Ella se ruborizó y no respondió.

Siguieron andando en silencio, cada uno preguntándose con aprensión que pasaría después.

De improviso el señor Scales se detuvo junto a un ruinoso muro bajo de ladrillo, construido en círculo, que se alzaba en las proximidades del camino.

—Creo que es un pozo antiguo —dijo.

—Sí, creo que sí.

Él cogió una piedra bastante grande y se acercó al muro.

—¡Tenga cuidado! —le encareció Sofía.

—¡Oh, no pasa nada! —dijo él despreocupadamente—. Escuchemos. Acérquese y escuche.

Ella obedeció de mala gana y él tiró la piedra sobre el sucio y ruinoso muro, que le llegaba a la altura del sombrero. Durante dos o tres segundos no se oyó nada. Después sonó una débil reverberación desde las profundidades del pozo. Y en la mente de Sofía surgieron espantosas imágenes de fantasmas de mineros vagando para siempre por los pasadizos subterráneos, muy abajo. El ruido de la piedra al caer había despertado en ella los secretos terrores de la tierra. Apenas podía mirar siquiera el muro sin un espasmo de temor.

—¡Qué raro —observó el señor Scales, con algo de miedo en la voz también— que dejen eso ahí de esa manera! Debe de ser muy profundo.

—Algunos lo son —tembló ella.

—Tengo que echar un vistazo —dijo él, poniendo las manos en lo alto del muro.

—¡Quítese de ahí! —exclamó Sofía.

—¡Oh, no pasa nada! —volvió a decir él en tono tranquilizador—, El muro es tan firme como una roca. —Y dio un ágil salto, asomándose.

Ella profirió un fuerte grito. Lo vio en el fondo del pozo, destrozado, ahogándose. Le pareció que la tierra temblaba bajo sus pies. Se sintió horriblemente mal. Y volvió a gritar. Nunca se había imaginado que en la existencia pudiese haber tanto sufrimiento.

Él bajó del muro deslizándose y se acercó a ella.

—¡No se ve el fondo! —dijo. Luego, observando su alterado rostro, se acercó más, con una sonrisa de superioridad masculina.

—¡Qué tontita! —dijo afectuosa y persuasivamente, poniendo en juego todo su poder de fascinación.

Percibió al instante que había calculado mal los efectos de su acción. La alarma de Sofía se transformó rápidamente en airado resentimiento. Retrocedió con gesto altivo, como si él hubiese intentado tocarla. ¿Se creía que porque daba la casualidad de que iba de paseo con él tenía derecho a dirigirse a ella con tanta familiaridad, a burlarse de ella, a llamarla «tontita» y a acercar su cara a la de ella? Con rápida y apasionada indignación dejó ver que le molestaban aquellas libertades.

Le mostró su orgullosa espalda, su cabeza inclinada y sus embravecidas faldas y echó a andar con prisa, casi corriendo. En cuanto a él, tal fue su sorpresa por aquellos inesperados fenómenos que por un momento se quedó sin hacer nada, simplemente miraba a Sofía y se sentía como un imbécil.

Luego ella oyó que la seguía. Era demasiado orgullosa para detenerse e incluso para reducir su velocidad.

—No pretendía... —murmuró detrás de ella.

No hubo respuesta alguna.

—Creo que debo disculparme —dijo él.

—¡Eso me parece a mí! —respondió ella, furiosa.

—¡Bien, pues me disculpo! —dijo él—. Deténgase un minuto.

—Le agradeceré que no me siga, señor Scales. —Se detuvo y lo abrasó con su desagrado. Después continuó. Y su corazón se atormentaba porque no podía convencerla de quedarse con él, sonreír y perdonarle y ganarse su sonrisa.

—Le escribiré —gritó desde lo alto de la pendiente.

Ella siguió andando, ridícula chicuela. Pero la agonía que había padecido cuando él se agarró al frágil muro no era ridícula, ni la tenebrosa visión de la mina, ni su enorme indignación cuando, tras desobedecerla, olvidó que ella era una reina. Para ella la escena era de una trágica sublimidad. Poco después había cruzado de nuevo el puente, pero no era la misma. ¡Éste fue el final de tan increíble aventura!

Cuando llegó a la barrera de peaje pensó en su madre y en Constanza. Se había olvidado por completo de ellas; durante aquel espacio de tiempo habían dejado de existir enteramente para ella.

IV

—¿Has salido, Sofía? —le preguntó la señora Baines en la sala, en tono inquisitivo. Sofía se había quitado el abrigo y el sombrero apresuradamente en el taller de cortar, pues había peligro de que llegase tarde a tomar el té, pero su rostro y su cabello mostraban huellas de la brisa de marzo. La señora Baines, cuya corpulencia parecía ir en aumento, estaba en la mecedora con un número de *El domingo en casa* en la mano. El servicio de té estaba en la mesa.

—Sí, mamá. Fui a ver a la señorita Chetwynd.

—Me gustaría que me lo dijeras cuando vayas a salir.

—Te estuve buscando antes de irme.

—Eso no es verdad, porque no me he movido de esta habitación desde las cuatro... No deberías decir esas cosas —añadió la señora Baines con más suavidad.

La señora Baines lo había pasado muy mal aquel día. Sabía que se hallaba en un estado irritable y nervioso y por lo tanto se decía, en su calidad de mujer prudente: «Debo vigilarme. No debo perder los estribos». Y pensaba cuán razonable era. No se imaginaba que todos sus gestos la traicionaban; no se le ocurrió que hay pocas cosas más mortificantes que ver a una persona, impulsada por elevados motivos, tratando visiblemente de ser amable y paciente bajo lo que considera una provocación extrema.

Maggie subió la escalera dando tumbos con la tetera y las tostadas calientes; así Sofía tuvo una excusa para callar. También Sofía lo había pasado muy mal, horrorosamente mal; en aquel momento llevaba toda una tragedia en su alma juvenil, poco acostumbrada a tales cargas. Su actitud hacia su madre era en parte temerosa y en parte desafiante; se podría resumir en la frase que se había repetido una y otra vez de camino a casa: «¡Bueno, mamá no puede matarme!».

La señora Baines dejó la revista de cubierta azul, y giró su mecedora hacia la mesa.

—Ya puedes servir el té —dijo la señora Baines.

—¿Dónde está Constanza?

—No se encuentra bien. Está acostada.

—¿Le pasa algo?

—No.

Esto no era exacto. A Constanza le pasaba casi todo; nunca había sido menos ella misma que en el transcurso de aquella tarde. Pero la señora Baines no tenía ninguna intención de discutir los asuntos amorosos de Constanza con Sofía. ¡Cuanto menos se hablara de amor a Sofía, mejor! ¡Ya era bastante nerviosa!

Se sentaron una frente a otra, a ambos lados de la chimenea, la monumental matrona cuyo negro corpiño dominaba la mesa con su corpulencia y cuya gran cara redonda estaba arrugada y marchita por lo que parecían ser innumerables años de alegría y de desilusión, y la joven delgada, tan fresca y virginal, tan ignorante, con todo el patetismo de una desprevenida víctima a punto de ser sacrificada al minotauro del Tiempo. Las dos se comieron las tostadas calientes con descuidada prisa, en silencio, ensimismadas, preocupadas y exteriormente indiferentes.

—¿Y qué te ha contado la señorita Chetwynd? —inquirió la señora Baines.

—No estaba en casa.

Aquello fue un golpe para la señora Baines, cuyas sospechas sobre Sofía, ahuyentadas por sus certidumbres sobre Constanza, regresaron súbitamente a su pensamiento y rondaron por él como una manada de tigres.

Con todo, la señora Baines estaba decidida a conservar la calma y a andarse con tiento.

—¡Oh! ¿A qué hora fuiste?

—No sé. Hacia las cuatro y media —Sofía se acabó el té rápidamente y se puso en pie—, ¿Le digo al señor Povey que puede venir?

(El señor Povey tomaba el té después de las señoras de la casa.)

—Sí, si te quedas en la tienda hasta que vaya yo. Enciéndeme el gas antes de irte.

Sofía tomó una vela de cera de un jarrón que había en la repisa de la chimenea, la prendió en el fuego y encendió el gas, que se dejó sentir en su prisión de cristal con un leve estallido.

—¿Qué es esa arcilla que llevas en las botas, niña? —preguntó la señora Baines.

—¿Arcilla? —repitió Sofía, mirando estúpidamente sus botas.

—Sí —insistió la señora Baines—, ¡Parece marga! ¿Dónde demonios has estado?

Interrogaba a su hija levantando hacia ella una mirada fría e inconscientemente hostil a través de sus gafas con montura de oro.

—Debe de habérseme pegado en los caminos —dijo Sofía, avanzando con celeridad hacia la puerta.

—¡Sofía!

—Sí, mamá.

—Cierra la puerta.

Sofía cerró a regañadientes la puerta, que tenía a medio abrir.

—Ven aquí.

Sofía obedeció; le temblaba el labio inferior.

—Me estás engañando, Sofía —dijo la señora Baines con una solemnidad feroz—. ¿Dónde has estado esta tarde?

El pie de Sofía se movía inquieto sobre la alfombra, detrás de la mesa.

—No he estado en ninguna parte —murmuró cabizbaja.

—¿Has visto al joven Scales?

—Sí —dijo Sofía en tono adusto, dirigiendo una mirada audaz a su madre. («No puede matarme. No puede matarme», musitaba su corazón. Y tenía a su favor la juventud y la belleza, mientras que su madre no era más que una mujer gorda y de mediana edad. «No puede matarme», decía su corazón con la cruel insolencia de una niña halagada por el espejo.)

—¿Cómo te encontraste con él?

No hubo respuesta.

—¡Sofía, ya me has oído lo que te he preguntado!

Tampoco hubo respuesta. Sofía tenía la mirada fija en la mesa.

(«No puede matarme».)

—Si te vas a poner huraña, tendré que suponer lo peor —dijo la señora Baines.

Sofía guardó silencio.

—Desde luego —continuó la señora Baines—, si decides ser mala, ni tu madre ni nadie pueden impedírtelo. Hay ciertas cosas que puedo hacer y las haré... Déjame que te advierta que el joven Scales es verdaderamente una mala persona. Lo sé todo sobre él. Ha llevado una vida desenfrenada en el extranjero, y de no haber sido porque su tío es socio de Birkinshaws nunca lo habrían vuelto a aceptar —una pausa—. Yo espero que un día seas una esposa feliz, pero eres demasiado joven para andar viéndote con jóvenes, y no hay nada que me pudiera inducir a tener algo que ver con ese Scales. No pienso tolerarlo. En lo sucesivo no saldrás sola. ¿Me entiendes?

Sofía guardó silencio.

—Espero que mañana estés de mejor talante. Te lo digo de verdad. Pero si no fuese así, tendré que tomar medidas muy severas. Te crees que puedes desafiarme. Pero en tu vida has estado más equivocada. Ahora no quiero verte más. Vete a avisar al señor Povey y dile a Maggie que traiga otro té. Casi haces que me alegre de que tu padre muriera entonces. Por lo menos se ha evitado esto.

Las palabras «muriera entonces» lograron intimidar a Sofía. Parecían indicar que la señora Baines, si bien, magnánimamente, nunca había mencionado el tema a Sofía, sabía exactamente cómo había muerto su marido. Sofía huyó de la habitación atemorizada y acobardada. No obstante, lo que pensaba era: «No me ha matado. Decidí que no hablaría y no he hablado».

Por la tarde, mientras estaba en la tienda cosiendo sombreros, formal y severa —mientras su madre lloraba secretamente en el primer piso y Constanza permanecía oculta en el segundo—, Sofía revivió la escena del antiguo pozo, pero de manera diferente, admitiendo que se había equivocado, sospechando instintivamente que había mostrado una estúpida desconfianza del amor. Allí sentada adoptó la actitud que debía y dijo las cosas que debía. En vez de ser una chiquilla boba fue una mujer cabal y deslumbrante. Cuando entraban clientes y las jóvenes dependientas subían discretamente el gas, conforme a las normas de la tienda, era verdaderamente extraordinario que no pudieran leer en el corazón de la hermosa Sofía las palabras que ardían en él: «Es usted la muchacha más refinada que he conocido en mi vida» y «le escribiré». Las dependientas tenían sus ideas acerca de Constanza y de Sofía, pero la verdad, al menos por cuanto atañe a Sofía, estaba fuera del alcance de su imaginación. Cuando sonaron las ocho y dio la orden formal de poner las fundas, ya vacía la tienda, lo que menos se imaginaban era que estuviera soñando con el correo y tramando cómo apoderarse de las cartas de la mañana antes que el señor Povey.

Capítulo VII

UNA DERROTA

I

Fue en junio cuando vino de Axe la tía Harriet a pasar unos días con su hermana menor, la señora Baines. El ferrocarril entre Axe y las Cinco Ciudades aún no se había inaugurado, pero aunque se hubiera inaugurado es probable que la tía Harriet no lo hubiese utilizado. Siempre viajaba de Axe a Bursley en el mismo vehículo, un pequeño carricoche que alquilaba en los establos de Bratt, en Axe, guiado por un cochero que entendía a fondo la importancia y las peculiaridades de la tía Harriet.

La corpulencia de la señora Baines había aumentado, de modo que ahora la tía Harriet le llevaba muy poca ventaja físicamente. Pero el ascendiente moral de la hermana mayor persistía. Las dos amplias viudas compartían el dormitorio de la señora Baines y pasaban mucho tiempo en él sumergidas en conversaciones susurradas, entrevistas de las que la señora Baines salía con el aire de quien ha recibido ilustración y la tía Harriet con el de quien la ha impartido. Las dos iban juntas de acá para allá, a la tienda, al salón de exhibición, a la sala, a la cocina y también a la ciudad dirigiéndose la una a la otra como «hermana», «hermana». En todas partes era «hermana», «hermana», «hermana mía», «vuestra querida madre», «vuestra tía Harriet». Se referían la una a la otra como fuentes y oráculos de sabiduría y buen gusto. La respetabilidad salía a acechar cuando ellas estaban en marcha. Toda la Plaza se retorcía incómoda, como si el ojo de Dios la hubiera tomado con ella. Las comidas en la sala se convirtieron en colaciones solemnes en las cuales brillaban la mejor plata y la mantelería más fina, pero de las cuales parecían excluidas la alegría y la naturalidad. (Digo «parecían» porque es indudable que la tía Harriet era natural, y había momentos en que tal vez pensara que estaba mostrando alegría, una alegría más desoladora que su severidad.) La generación más joven quedó extinguida, aplastada y sin vida bajo el peso de las viudas.

El señor Povey no era hombre que se dejara aplastar por pesos de ninguna clase; su eliminación fue una sorprendente prueba de las proezas de las viudas, quienes incluso pasaron por encima del señor Povey como dos locomotoras, con la sublime inconsciencia de las locomotoras, dejando tras ellas un objeto inanimado en su camino y casi sin reparar en el choque. El señor Povey detestaba a la tía Harriet, pero ¿cómo podía rebelarse contra ella, aplastado en el camino? No dejaba de pensar que la tía Harriet lo estaba vigilando y comunicando el resultado cada poco tiempo a la señora Baines en el dormitorio. Pensaba que lo sabía todo sobre él, hasta aquellas lágrimas que habían humedecido sus ojos. Pensaba que no podía ni soñar hacer nada bien para la tía Harriet, que la absoluta perfección en el cumplimiento del deber no podía causar más impresión en ella que una caricia en los mandos de una locomotora. Constanza, la adorable Constanza, también era mirada con recelo. No había nada concreto en la conducta de la tía Harriet con ella, pero había algo que no era concreto, una indirecta, un pálpito, que insinuaba a Constanza: «Ten cuidado, no vaya a ser por ventura que te conviertas en prima segunda de una mujer de la vida».

A Sofía la mimaba. Con frecuencia le daba juguetonamente golpecitos con el dedal mientras cosía el dobladillo de algún guardapolvos (pues la añosa dama era capaz de elevar un guardapolvos a su propia dignidad). En dos ocasiones la llamó «mariposita mía». Y se le confió la ornamentación del sombrero nuevo de verano de la tía Harriet. La tía Harriet opinaba que Sofía estaba pálida. Conforme pasaban los días, la tía Harriet insistió en la palidez de Sofía hasta convertirla en un artículo de fe que era preciso suscribir bajo pena de excomunión. Entonces amaneció el día en el que la tía Harriet dijo, clavando la mirada en Sofía como una tía cariñosa: «A esta niña le vendría bien un cambio». Y luego amaneció otro día en el que la tía Harriet, fijando compasivamente la mirada en Sofía, como una tía devota, dijo: «Es una lástima que esta niña no pueda disfrutar de un cambio». Y la señora Baines la miró también fijamente y dijo: «Es verdad».

Y otro día dijo la tía Harriet: «He estado pensando si a mi pequeña Sofía le apetecería venir a hacer compañía una temporada a su vieja tía».

Había pocas cosas que a Sofía le apetecieran menos. La muchacha se juró airadamente que no iría, que nada la induciría a ir. Pero estaba en una red; estaba entre las mallas de la corrección familiar. Hiciera lo que hiciese no podía inventarse una razón para no ir. Desde luego no podía decir a su tía simplemente que no quería ir. Y entonces se iniciaron los complicados preparativos de marcha de la tía Harriet. La tía Harriet nunca hacía nada sencillamente. Y no era capaz de apresurarse. Setenta y dos horas antes de la partida tenía

que empezar a ocuparse de su baúl, pero antes Maggie tenía que limpiar el baúl con un paño húmedo bajo la mirada y la dirección de la tía Harriet. Y había que escribir al hombre de las caballerizas de Axe y a los criados de Axe, y había que sopesar y considerar las predicciones del tiempo. Y de una u otra forma, cuando todas estas cosas estuvieron terminadas se entendió tácitamente que Sofía iba a acompañar a su amable tía a los ventosos páramos de Axe. ¡En Axe no había humos! ¡En Axe no había aire viciado! ¡Qué existencia tan desahogada la de una viuda de buena salud en una ciudad residencial con una baja tasa de mortalidad y un famoso paisaje! «¿Has hecho tu equipaje, Sofía?». No, no lo había hecho. «Bueno, ya iré yo a ayudarte».

¡Era imposible resistir el empuje de un cuerpo tan enorme como el de la tía Harriet! Era irresistible.

Llegó el día de la partida, que puso en conmoción a todos los habitantes de la casa. La comida se sirvió un cuarto de hora antes de lo habitual para que la tía Harriet pudiera llegar a Axe a su acostumbrada hora del té. Después de comer, Maggie recibió tres asombrosos delantales de muselina, entregados con un gesto regio. Bajaron el baúl y la caja de Sofía y en la sala hubo un tenue olor a guantes negros de cabritilla. Se esperaba al carricoche, que apareció a su hora («¡Siempre puedo confiar en Bladen!», dijo la tía Harriet); se abrió la puerta y Bladen, con las piernas entumecidas, bajó del pescante y se tocó el ala del sombrero saludando a la tía Harriet, que llenaba el umbral.

—¿Les ha dado el pienso, Bladen? —preguntó.

—Sí, *s'ñora* —respondió él en tono tranquilizador.

Bladen y el señor Povey sacaron el baúl y la caja y Constanza se hizo cargo de unos paquetes que depositó en los rincones del carruaje siguiendo las instrucciones de su tía; era como estibar la carga de un barco.

—¡Vamos, Sofía, corazón! —llamó la señora Baines asomándose a la escalera. Y bajó Sofía con lentitud. La señora Baines le ofreció el rostro. Sofía le echó una rápida mirada.

—¡No te creas que no veo por qué haces que me vaya! —exclamó Sofía con voz áspera y furiosa y los ojos centelleantes—, ¡No estoy tan ciega! —Dio a su madre un beso rápido y despreciativo. Después añadió apartándose de ella—: ¡Pero a Constanza la dejas hacer lo que quiera!

Éste fue su único y amargo comentario sobre el episodio, pero puso en él toda la profunda amargura acumulada en muchas noches de rebeldía.

La señora Baines reprimió un suspiro. Aquella explosión indudablemente la perturbó. Había albergado la esperanza de que la tersa superficie de las cosas no se agitara.

Sofía salió de la casa de un salto. Y el grupo, incluyendo varios pilluelos, contempló conteniendo el aliento cómo la tía Harriet, después de dar sus majestuosos adioses, subió la escalerilla y se introdujo por la puerta del vehículo al interior de éste, fue una operación como enhebrar una aguja con hilo demasiado grueso. Una vez dentro, los aros de su falda se extendieron en súbita liberación, llenando el carricoche.

Cuando, con las debidas formalidades, salió el equipaje, la señora Baines dio otro suspiro, esta vez de alivio. Las hermanas habían ganado. Ahora podía aguardar la inminente llegada del señor Scales con toda tranquilidad.

II

Aquellas singulares palabras de Sofía —«pero a Constanza la dejas hacer lo que quiera» —habían perturbado a la señora Baines más de lo que pareció en un principio. La incomodaban como una mosca tardía en otoño. No había dicho nada del caso de Constanza a nadie, exceptuando naturalmente a la señora Maddack. Tenía la sensación instintiva de que no podía mostrar la menor indulgencia con los impulsos románticos de su hija mayor sin parecer injusta con la menor y había actuado en consonancia. La memorable mañana del agudo ataque de celos del señor Povey había —al menos de momento— apagado el fuego, le había quitado leña y lo había ocultado, y desde entonces no se había dicho una palabra acerca del estado del corazón de Constanza. En el gran peligro que se atribuía al señor Scales, se había dejado a un lado el corazón como si fuese una cosa que podía esperar, como se deja a un lado el arreglo de la ropa blanca cuando se

avecina un terremoto. La señora Baines estaba segura de que Constanza no había hablado con Sofía acerca del señor Povey. Constanza, que comprendía a su madre, tenía demasiado sentido común y demasiado sentido del decoro para eso... y sin embargo ahí estaba Sofía exclamando «pero a Constanza la dejas hacer lo que quiera». ¿Eran entonces del dominio público las relaciones entre Constanza y el señor Povey? ¿Hablaban también de ellas las dependientas?

Lo cierto es que las dependientas sí hablaban de ellas, no en la tienda, ya que una de las partes o la propia señora Baines estaba siempre allí, sino fuera de ella. Casi no hablaban de otra cosa cuando estaban libres; cómo lo había mirado ella aquel día, cómo se había sonrojado él, y así sucesiva e interminablemente. Sin embargo la señora Baines creía verdaderamente que era la única que lo sabía. Tal es el poder del engaño, imposible de erradicar, de que los asuntos propios, en especial los de los hijos, son misteriosamente distintos de los de los demás.

Tras la marcha de Sofía, la señora Baines examinó a su hija y a su gerente durante la cena con mirada curiosa y desconfiada. Ambos trabajaban, hablaban y comían igual que si la señora Baines nunca los hubiese sorprendido llorando juntos en el taller de cortar. Aparentaban la mayor naturalidad del mundo. Tal vez jamás hubieran oído susurrar el nombre del amor. Y no podía haber engaño detrás de aquel decoro, pues Constanza era incapaz de engaño. Sin embargo, la señora Baines no tenía la conciencia tranquila. Reinaba el orden pero, con todo, sabía que tenía que hacer algo, averiguar algo, decidir algo; si cumplía con su deber tenía que llevarse a un lado a Constanza y decirle: «Ahora, Constanza, tengo la mente más despejada. Dime con franqueza qué es lo que viene ocurriendo entre el señor Povey y tú. Nunca he entendido qué quiso decir aquella escena en el taller de cortar. Dímelo». Tenía que hablar en este tono. Pero no podía. A aquella vigorosa mujer no le quedaba la suficiente energía. Quería descansar, descansar —aunque fuera un descanso de cobarde, una tranquilidad de avestruz— tras el torbellino de aprensiones motivado por Sofía. Su alma clamaba pidiendo paz. Sin embargo, no había de tenerla.

Justo el primer domingo después de marcharse Sofía, el señor Povey no fue a la capilla por la mañana sin dar razón alguna de su inusual comportamiento. Desayunó con apetito, pero había en su mirada algo peculiar que inquietó un poco a la señora Baines, algo que no pudo aprehender ni definir. Cuando ella y Constanza volvieron de la iglesia, el señor Povey estaba tocando «La Roca de los Siglos» en el armonio, ¡cosa también inusual! La parte seria de la comida incluía carne asada y budín de Yorkshire, servido éste como plato dulce antes de la carne. La señora Baines comió generosamente de las dos cosas, pues le encantaban y además siempre tenía hambre después de oír un sermón. También atacó a fondo el queso de Cheshire. Tenía la intención de dormir un rato en el salón después de comer. Los domingos por la tarde, invariablemente, intentaba dormirse en el salón y raras veces dejaba de conseguirlo. Por lo general las muchachas la acompañaban allí desde la mesa y o bien se «acomodaban» de la misma manera o bien se iban sin hacer ruido al ver que aquella figura majestuosa se iba hundiendo en los profundos huecos del cómodo sillón. La señora Baines veía venir con placer su somnolienta tarde de domingo.

Constanza dio las gracias después de la carne; la forma, en aquella concreta ocasión, fue:

—Gracias, Señor, por los alimentos que acabamos de tomar, amén. Mamá, tengo que subir a mi habitación—, *(«*Mi habitación», porque Sofía estaba muy lejos.)

Y se marchó corriendo, de una manera curiosamente infantil.

—Bueno, hija, no hace falta tanta prisa —dijo la señora Baines, haciendo soñar la campanilla y levantándose.

Esperaba que Constanza se acordara de las condiciones que precedían a la siesta.

—Me gustaría hablar un momento con usted, si no le importa, señora Baines —dijo de improviso el señor Povey con visible nerviosismo. Su tono supuso un golpe inesperado para la paz de espíritu de la señora Baines. Era un tono portentoso.

—¿De qué? —preguntó con una inflexión de voz encaminada a recordar sutilmente al señor Povey qué día era.

—De Constanza —dijo aquel hombre sorprendente.

—¡De Constanza! —repitió la señora Baines con un histriónico aire de perplejidad.

Entró Maggie en la estancia, únicamente respondiendo a la campanilla, pero a la señora Baines le vino de inmediato una idea a la cabeza: «¡Hay que ver lo entrometidos que son los criados!». Por espacio de cinco segundos se sintió agraviada con Maggie. Se vio obligada a volverse a sentar y esperar mientras Maggie

recogía la mesa. El señor Povey se metió las manos en los bolsillos, se levantó, se acercó a la ventana, silbó y en términos generales se comportó de una manera que presagiaba lo peor.

Por fin desapareció Maggie, cerrando la puerta.

—¿Y bien, señor Povey?

—¡Oh! —dijo el señor Povey volviéndose a ella con una ridícula brusquedad nerviosa, como queriendo decir: ¡Ah, sí! Teníamos que hablar de algo: ¡se me olvidaba!». Después empezó—. Es acerca de Constanza y de mí.

Sí, estaba claro que habían tramado aquella entrevista. Estaba claro que Constanza se había quitado de en medio a propósito para dejar libre al señor Povey. Estaban confabulados. Lo inevitable había sobrevenido. ¡Adiós siesta! ¡Adiós descanso! ¡Otra vez las preocupaciones!

—No estoy en absoluto satisfecho con la actual situación —dijo el señor Povey en un tono que se correspondía con sus palabras.

—No sé lo que quiere decir, señor Povey —replicó fríamente la señora Baines. Aquello no era más que una mentira.

—¡Bueno, de veras, señora Baines...! —protestó el señor Povey—. ¡Supongo que no me negará que sabe que hay algo entre Constanza y yo! ¡Supongo que no lo negará!

—¿Qué es lo que hay entre Constanza y usted? Puedo asegurarle que yo...

—Eso depende de usted —la interrumpió el señor Povey. Cuando estaba nervioso sus modales se estropeaban y su conducta se asemejaba a la descortesía—¡Eso depende de usted! —repitió, adusto.

—Pero...

—¿Vamos a estar comprometidos o no? —prosiguió el señor Povey, como si la señora Baines fuese culpable de algún grave fallo y estuviera decidido a no perdonarla—. Eso es lo que creo que hay que dejar bien sentado de una u otra manera. Deseo hablar sin tapujos... en lo sucesivo, igual que en el pasado.

—¡Pero si usted no me ha dicho nada en absoluto! —protestó la señora Baines, levantando las cejas. El modo en que aquel hombre se lo había soltado todo de buenas a primeras era ciertamente demasiado audaz.

El señor Povey se acercó a ella, que seguía sentada a la mesa agitando sus rizos y mirándose las manos.

—¡Usted sabe que hay algo entre nosotros! —insistió.

—¿Cómo iba a saber que hay algo entre ustedes? Constanza nunca me ha dicho nada. ¿Y acaso me lo ha dicho usted?

—Bueno —dijo él—, no hemos ocultado nada.

—¿Qué es lo que hay entre Constanza y usted? ¡Si se me permite preguntarlo!

—Eso depende de usted —volvió a decir él.

—¿Le ha pedido que se case con usted?

—No. No le he pedido exactamente que se case conmigo. —Vaciló— Ya ve usted...

La señora Baines reunió sus fuerzas.

—¿La ha besado? —interrogó con voz fría.

Entonces el señor Povey enrojeció.

—No la he besado exactamente —tartamudeó, escandalizado al parecer por la pregunta—. No; no diría que la he besado.

Tal vez fuera que antes de comprometerse deseara saber lo que entendía la señora Baines por un beso.

—Es usted asombroso —dijo ella con altivez. No era ni más ni menos que la verdad.

—Todo lo que quiero saber es..., ¿tiene usted algo contra mí? —preguntó bruscamente—. Porque de ser así...

—¿Algo contra usted, señor Povey? ¿Por qué iba a tener algo contra usted?

—Entonces ¿por qué no podemos comprometernos?

Ella consideró que la estaba intimidando.

—Eso es otra cuestión —respondió.

—¿Por qué no podemos comprometernos? ¿Es que no valgo lo suficiente?

El hecho es que se consideraba que él no valía lo suficiente. La señora Maddack había juzgado sin lugar a dudas que no valía lo suficiente. Era una sólida masa de excelentes cualidades, pero carecía de brillo, de importancia, de dignidad. No era capaz de imponerse. Ése había sido el veredicto.

Y en aquellos momentos, mientras la señora Baines reprochaba secretamente al señor Baines su incapacidad para imponerse, se le estaba imponiendo a ella con toda la paciencia del mundo ¡y aquel fenómeno se le escapaba! Tuvo la impresión de que la estaba intimidando, pero por alguna razón no pudo percibir su poder. ¡Sin embargo, un hombre capaz de intimidar a la señora Baines no era desde luego un alma vulgar!

—Ya conoce la elevada opinión que tengo de usted —dijo ella.

El señor Povey continuó en un tono más suave: —Suponiendo que Constanza esté dispuesta a comprometerse, ¿entiendo que tengo el consentimiento de usted?

—Pero Constanza es demasiado joven.

—Tiene veinte años. Más de veinte.

—Sea como fuere, ¡no esperará usted que le dé una respuesta ahora!

—¿Por qué no? Ya conoce mi posición.

La conocía. Desde un punto de vista práctico aquella boda sería ideal: por este lado no se le podían poner pegas. Pero la señora Baines no podía dejar de pensar que para su hija sería «venir a menos». Al fin y al cabo, ¿quién era el señor Povey? El señor Povey no era nadie.

—Tengo que pensarlo —dijo con firmeza, apretando los labios—. No puedo contestarle así. Es un asunto serio.

—¿Cuándo podré tener su respuesta? ¿Mañana?

—No..., en realidad...

—¿Dentro de una semana, pues?

—No puedo comprometerme en una fecha —dijo con altanería la señora Baines. Pensó que estaba ganando terreno.

—... No puedo seguir aquí indefinidamente tal como están las cosas —estalló el señor Povey; en su tono había un toque de histeria.

—Ahora, señor Povey, le ruego que sea razonable.

—Todo eso está muy bien —continuó él— Todo eso está muy bien. ¡Pero lo que digo es que los patronos no tienen derecho a tener empleados varones en sus casas a menos que estén dispuestos a dejar que sus hijas se casen con ellos! ¡Eso es lo que digo! ¡No tienen derecho!

La señora Baines no supo qué contestar.

—Si sucede así tendré que irme —concluyó el pretendiente.

«¿Si sucede qué? —se preguntó ella—, ¿Qué mosca le ha picado?». Y en voz alta:

—Ya sabe que si se va me en pone una situación muy incómoda; espero que no quiera mezclar dos cosas distintas. Espero que no esté tratando de amenazarme.

—¡Amenazarla! —exclamó él—¿Piensa usted que me iría por gusto? Si me voy será porque no puedo soportarlo. Eso es todo. No puedo soportarlo. Quiero a Constanza, y si no puedo tenerla no puedo soportarlo. ¿De qué cree usted que estoy hecho?

—No me cabe duda... —empezó ella.

—¡Todo eso está muy bien! —casi gritó él.

—Pero, por favor, déjeme hablar —dijo la señora Baines en voz pausada.

—Lo único que digo es que no puedo soportarlo. Eso es todo... Los patronos no tienen derecho... Tenemos nuestros sentimientos, como los demás.

Estaba profundamente conmovido. Tal vez a un observador estrictamente imparcial de la naturaleza humana le habría parecido un tanto grotesco. No obstante, estaba profunda y auténticamente conmovido; quizá la naturaleza humana no hubiera podido mostrar nada más humano que el señor Povey en el momento en el que, incapaz de contener por más tiempo el paroxismo que de forma tan sorprendente se había apoderado de él, huyó de la sala, arrebatado por la pasión, al refugio de su dormitorio.

«Eso es lo malo que tiene esa gente tan tranquila y calladita —dijo para sí la señora Baines—. Uno nunca sabe si van a estallar. Y cuando lo hacen, es terrible..., terrible. ¿Qué he hecho, qué he dicho, para que se pusiera así? ¡Nada! ¡Nada!».

Y ¿dónde había ido a parar su siesta de la tarde? ¿Qué le iba a pasar a su hija? ¿Qué podía decir a Constanza? ¿Cómo iba ella a comportarse ahora con el señor Povey? ¡Ah! Necesitó ser una mujer valiente e indomable para no ponerse a gritar: «¡He sufrido demasiado! ¡Haced lo que queráis, pero dejadme morir en paz!», y, tras decir aquello, ¡dejar que pasara lo que tuviera que pasar!

III

Ni el señor Povey ni Constanza le volvieron a sacar a colación el delicado tema y ella decidió no ser la primera en hablar de él. Consideraba que el señor Povey se había aprovechado de su situación y además había sido infantil y descortés. Y personalmente culpaba en cierto modo a Constanza de la conducta de aquél. Así pues, el asunto quedó, por así decirlo, suspendido en el éter entre las fuerzas contrarias del orgullo y la pasión.

Poco después tuvieron lugar unos acontecimientos en comparación con los cuales las vicisitudes del corazón del señor Povey no tenían más relevancia que un chaparrón en abril. Y el sino no dio aviso alguno; antes bien, el indicio fue una total ausencia de acontecimientos. Cuando llegó la acostumbrada circular de Birkinshaws, el nombre de «nuestro señor Scales» había sido sustituido por otro, desconocido. La señora Baines, que vio la circular por casualidad, experimentó una sensación de alivio mezclada con la decepción profesional de un diplomático que se ha preparado minuciosamente para contingencias que no han tenido lugar. Había hecho irse a Sofía para nada; sin duda su afecto maternal había hecho una montaña de un grano de arena. Realmente, cuando reflexionaba acerca del pasado, no podía recordar nada que justificara su teoría de que estuviera naciendo una relación entre Sofía y el joven. ¡Nada! Todo lo que podía aducir era que Sofía se había encontrado dos veces en la calle a Scales.

Tenía un interés curioso por el sino de Scales, para quien en su fuero interno había profetizado el mal desde hacía mucho tiempo; cuando llegó el representante de Birkinshaws se las arregló para estar en la tienda, con la intención de conversar con él y enterarse de todo cuanto pudiera después de que el señor Povey se hubiera ocupado de los asuntos comerciales. Con este propósito, en el momento adecuado atravesó la tienda dirigiéndose al señor Povey y mientras lo hacía obtuvo una panorámica transitoria de King Street y, en esta calle, de un vehículo familiar. Se detuvo; entonces le pareció oír unos lejanos golpes a la puerta. Abandonando al viajante, fue a toda prisa hacia la sala y en el pasillo comprobó que se oía llamar de una manera airada e impaciente, como si se tratase de alguien que piensa que ya lleva demasiado rato llamando.

—¡Por supuesto, Maggie está en lo alto de la casa! —murmuró sarcásticamente.

Soltó la cadena, abrió el cerrojo y dio vuelta a la llave de la puerta lateral.

—¡Por fin! —era la voz de la tía Harriet, enfadada—. ¡Vaya! ¿Eres tú, hermana? Te has levantado pronto. ¡Bendito sea Dios!

Aquellos dos majestuosos e imponentes seres se reunieron en la alfombrilla, inclinándose de modo que pudieran darse un beso por encima de sus tremendos senos.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó temerosa la señora Baines.

—¡Bueno, eso me pregunto yo! —dijo la señora Maddack—. ¡Y he venido precisamente para preguntártelo!

—¿Dónde está Sofía? —interrogó la señora Baines.

—¡No querrás decir que no ha venido, hermana! —la señora Maddack se hundió en el sofá.

—¿Venir? ¡Claro que no ha venido! ¿Qué quieres decir, hermana?

—Se marchó en el momento mismo en que recibió la carta de Constanza, ayer, en la que le decía que estabas enferma en cama y que era mejor que viniera a ayudar en la tienda. Le pedí el carricoche a Bratt.

La señora Baines se hundió a su *vez en* el sofá.

—No he estado enferma —dijo—, ¡Y Constanza lleva una semana sin escribir! Precisamente le estaba diciendo ayer...

—¡Hermana... no puede ser! Sofía tenía carta de Constanza todas las mañanas. Por lo menos decía que eran de Constanza. Le dije que no dejara de escribirme para decirme cómo estabas anoche y prometió hacerlo. Y al no recibir nada en el correo de esta mañana decidí venir yo misma para ver si se trataba de algo grave.

—¡Ya lo creo que es grave! —murmuró la señora Baines.

—¿Qué...?

—Sofía se ha escapado. ¡Eso es, hablando en plata! —dijo la señora Baines con fría calma.

—¡No! No puedo creer semejante cosa. He cuidado de Sofía día y noche como si fuese mi propia hija y...

—Si no se ha escapado, ¿dónde está?

La señora Maddack abrió la puerta con gesto trágico.

—Bladen —llamó en voz alta al conductor del carricoche, que aguardaba en la acera.

—Sí, *s'ñora.*

—Fue Pember el que trajo a la señorita Sofía ayer por la tarde, ¿verdad?

—*Sí, s'ñora.*

Ella vaciló. Una pregunta torpe podía ilustrar a un miembro de la clase a la que nunca hay que ilustrar en lo tocante a los asuntos privados de uno.

—¿No llegó hasta aquí?

—No, *s'ñora.* Casualmente dijo anoche cuando volvió que la señorita Sofía le había dicho que la llevara a la estación de Knype.

—¡Eso pensaba yo! —dijo valerosamente la señora Maddack.

—Sí, *s'ñora.*

—¡Hermana! —gimió tras cerrar cuidadosamente la puerta.

Se agarraron la una a la otra.

El horror de lo que había sucedido no se apoderó inmediatamente de ellas, pues la capacidad de creer, de captar imaginariamente un acontecimiento supremo, sea de gran aflicción o de gran felicidad, es ridículamente limitado. Pero cada minuto que pasaba aquel horror se tomaba más claro e intenso, las dominaba de una manera más trágica. Ninguna de ellas pudo pronunciar el nombre de Gerald Scales. Y la tía Harriet no podía rebajarse a defenderse de una posible acusación de descuido, ni tampoco la señora Baines podía rebajarse a asegurar a su hermana que era incapaz de formular tal acusación. Y a la enorme locura criminal de Sofía no podían ni siquiera aludir: era indescriptible. Así se desarrolló la entrevista, torpe e inconsecuente, sin llevar a nada.

Sofía se había ido. Se había ido con Gerald Scales. Aquella hermosa muchacha, aquella criatura imprevisible, indomable, imposible, había cometido la mayor de las locuras; sin pretexto ni excusa, ¡y con qué elaborado engaño! ¡Sí, sin excusa! No la habían tratado con dureza; había gozado de un grado de libertad que habría asombrado y escandalizado a sus abuelas; la habían mimado y consentido, le habían seguido la corriente. Y su respuesta era deshonrar a la familia con un acto tan irrevocable como atroz. ¡Si entre sus deseos estaba el de humillar a aquellas dos majestades, su madre y la tía Harriet, estaría muy satisfecha si pudiera verlas en el sofá, escarnecidas, avergonzadas, mortalmente heridas! ¡Ah, qué monstruosa crueldad la de la juventud!

¿Qué debía hacerse? ¿Decírselo a la amable Constanza? No; por el momento no era algo que se pudiese comunicar a la joven generación. Era demasiado nuevo y demasiado crudo para la joven generación. Además, por capaces, orgullosas y experimentadas que fueran sentían la necesidad de una voz de hombre y de unas ideas duras e insensibles de hombre. Lo suyo era acudir al señor Critchlow. Se envió a Maggie en su busca, con el ruego específico de que fuera a la puerta lateral. Llegó expectante, previendo gratamente algún desastre, y no se vio decepcionado. Con las dos hermanas pasó la hora más feliz que había tenido en años. Con toda celeridad pasó revista a las opciones que tenían. ¿Llamarían a la policía o se arriesgarían a esperar? Ellas rehuían la cuestión, pero con feroz brutalidad él las condujo una y otra vez al punto en que era preciso tomar una decisión inmediata... ¡Bueno, no podían contárselo a la policía! Eso no podía ser, sencillamente... Luego había que afrontar otro peligro... No tuvo compasión de ellas. Y mientras las torturaba llegó un telegrama enviado desde Charing Cross: «Estoy bien. Sofía». Aquello probaba por lo menos que la muchacha tenía corazón, que no era despreocupada.

A la señora Baines le parecía que había tenido a Sofía el día anterior, que sólo el día anterior era una cría, una colegiala que se merecía una bofetada. Pasaron los años en unas pocas horas. ¡Y ahora mandaba telegramas desde Charing Cross! ¡Qué diferente era la letra del telegrama de la de Sofía! ¡Qué misteriosamente seca e inhumana era la letra oficial, que la señora Baines contemplaba con los ojos enrojecidos y húmedos!

El señor Critchlow dijo que debía ir alguien a Manchester a ver qué había ocurrido con el señor Scales. Fue él mismo a primera hora de la tarde y regresó con la noticia de que una tía de Scales había muerto repentinamente dejándole doce mil libras y que, después de pelearse con su tío Boldero, había abandonado Birkinshaws en el plazo de una hora y había desaparecido con su herencia.

—Está más claro que el agua —dijo el señor Critchlow—, ¡Yo podría haberles advertido de todo esto hace años, desde que ella mató a su padre!

El señor Critchlow no dejó nada por decir.

En el transcurso de la noche la señora Baines revivió toda la vida de Sofía, la revivió más intensamente que como nunca lo hiciera la propia Sofía.

Al otro día empezó a enterarse la gente. Un cuchicheo casi inaudible atravesó la Plaza y se extendió por la ciudad; en el silencio todos lo oyeron: «¡Sofía Baines se ha escapado con un viajante de comercio!».

Al cabo de quince días llegó una nota, también desde Londres: «Querida madre, me he casado con Gerald Scales. Por favor, no te preocupes por mí. Nos marchamos al extranjero. Con cariño, Sofía. Un beso a Constanza». ¡No había manchas de lágrimas en aquel papel azul pálido! ¡No había signo alguno de agitación!

Y la señora Baines se dijo: «Mi vida ha terminado». Y así era, a pesar de que tenía apenas cincuenta años. Se sentía vieja, vieja y derrotada. Había luchado y había sido vencida. El designio eterno había sido demasiado para ella. El valor había desaparecido en ella: el valor para mantener la cabeza alta y mirar de frente a la Plaza. ¡Ella, la esposa de John Baines! ¡Ella, una Syme de Axe!

¡Las casas viejas, en el curso de su historia, presencian tristes espectáculos y nunca los olvidan! Y desde entonces, en la solemne fisonomía de la casa triple de John Baines en la esquina de la Plaza de San Lucas y King Street han permanecido las huellas del espectáculo que presenció la mañana del día en que el señor y la

señora Povey volvieron de su viaje de novios, el espectáculo de la señora Baines subiendo al carricoche para partir hacia Axe; de la señora Baines, cargada con baúles y paquetes, abandonando el escenario de sus luchas y de su derrota, al cual había llegado delgada como un palillo, para volver gruesa y pesada —y con el corazón pesado— a su infancia; contentándose con vivir con su grandiosa hermana hasta el momento en que debiera disponerse a ser enterrada. La vieja casa, mugrienta e impasible, tal vez oyó a su corazón decir: «Ayer mismo eran niñas, tan chiquitinas, y ahora...». Un carricoche que se aleja puede ser una cosa terrible.

Libro II

CONSTANZA

Capítulo I

UNA REVOLUCIÓN

I

—¡Bien! —dijo el señor Povey, levantándose de la mecedora que en una época anterior fue de John Baines—¡Como alguna vez tengo que empezar, igual puedo empezar ahora!

Y pasó de la sala a la tienda. Constanza lo siguió con los ojos hasta la puerta, donde se encontraron sus miradas en ese instante pasajero que expresa la ternura de las personas que sienten más que besan.

Era el día en que la señora Baines, renunciando a la soberanía de la Plaza de San Lucas, se había ido a vivir a la casa de su hermana Harriet Maddack en Axe. Poco sospechaba Constanza la secreta angustia de aquella marcha. Sólo sabía que era muy propio de su madre, luego de disponer perfectamente la casa para la llegada desde Buxton de la pareja en viaje de novios, desaparecer temprano para evitar el natural y ruboroso retraimiento de dicha pareja. Era propio del sentido común de su madre y de la cordial comprensión de su madre. Además, Constanza no se ocupaba de los sentimientos de su madre porque estaba muy ocupada con los suyos. Allí estaba rebosante de nuevo conocimiento y de nueva importancia, de experiencia y de extrañas e inesperadas aspiraciones, propósitos, sí, ¡y astucias! Y con todo, aunque las mismas curvas de sus mejillas parecían haberse alterado misteriosamente, aún estaba allí la antigua Constanza, un alma inocente que titubeaba en extender sus alas y abandonar para siempre el cuerpo que había sido su hogar; se veía al tímido ser asomándose con añoranza a los ojos de la mujer casada.

Constanza tocó la campanilla para decir a Maggie que quitara la mesa; al hacerlo tuvo la ilusión de que no era en realidad una mujer casada y un ama de casa sino solamente una especie de imitación. Esperaba fervientemente que todo marchara bien en la casa, por lo menos hasta que estuviese más acostumbrada a su situación.

Sus esperanzas habían de verse decepcionadas. La sonrisa obsequiosa y bastante tonta de Maggie ocultó por un momento la indecible tragedia que estaba esperando a la desarmada Constanza.

—Si me hace el favor, señora Povey —dijo Maggie amontonando tazas en la bandeja de estaño con sus grandes manos rojas, que siempre tenían el aspecto de algo que viniera de la carnicería; y tras una pausa—, ¿quiere usted aceptar esto?

Ahora bien, antes de la boda Maggie ya había regalado a Constanza con lágrimas de afecto una pareja de jarrones de cristal azul (para salir a comprar los cuales se había visto obligada a pedir un permiso especial), y Constanza se preguntó qué iba a salir ahora del bolsillo de Maggie. Salió un pequeño papel doblado. Constanza lo aceptó y leyó: «Le comunico con un mes de antelación que me despido. Firmado, Maggie. 10 de junio de 1867».

—¡Maggie! —exclamó la antigua Constanza, aterrada por aquel increíble suceso, antes de que la mujer casada pudiera reprimirla.

—Como nunca me he despedido, señora Povey —dijo Maggie—, no sé cómo hay que hacerlo. Pero espero que lo acepte, señora Povey.

—¡Oh! ¡Por supuesto! —dijo cortésmente la señora Povey, como si Maggie no fuera la columna que sostenía la casa, como si no la hubiese visto nacer, como si no se hubiese anunciado de repente el fin del mundo, como si la Plaza de San Lucas no resultara inconcebible sin Maggie—. Pero ¿por qué...?

—Bueno, señora Povey. Lo he estado pensando en mi cocina y me dije: «Si va a haber un cambio, mejor que haya dos», digo. Claro que yo me deslomaría trabajando por usted, señorita Constanza.

Aquí Maggie se echó a llorar en la bandeja.

Constanza la miró. A pesar de la muselina especial de aquel día, tenía restos del desaliño del que la señora Baines nunca había sido capaz de curarla. Tenía más de cuarenta años; era grandona y desgarbada. No

tenía figura ni encantos de ninguna clase. Era lo que quedaba de una mujer después de veintidós años en la cueva de aquella familia de filántropos. ¡Y lo cierto es que en su cueva había estado pensando cosas! Constanza captó por primera vez, bajo la obrera deshumanizada, los indicios de una individualidad diferenciada y tal vez caprichosa. Los compromisos de Maggie nunca habían sido reales para sus patronos. Dentro de la casa no había sido nunca, en la práctica, nada más que Maggie: un organismo. ¡Y ahora se estaba permitiendo tener ideas sobre cambios!

—Pronto encontrará a alguien que le convenga, señora Povey —dijo Maggie—. Hay muchas..., muchas... —estalló en sollozos.

—Pero, si de verdad quiere irse, ¿por qué llora, Maggie? —le preguntó la señora Povey, con gran perspicacia—. ¿Se lo ha dicho a mamá?

—No, señorita —gimoteó Maggie, secándose distraídamente las arrugadas mejillas con la inútil muselina—. Ni se me ocurriría decírselo a su madre. Y como usted es ahora la señora, pensé esperar hasta que usted viniese a casa. Espero que me disculpe, señora Povey.

—Desde luego, lo siento mucho. Ha sido usted muy buena sirvienta. Y en estos tiempos...

La joven había tomado este giro de su madre. A ninguna de las dos se les ocurrió al parecer que vivían en la década de los sesenta.

—Gracias, señorita.

—Y ¿qué piensa hacer, Maggie? Ya sabe que no encontrará muchas casas como ésta.

—A decir verdad, señorita, yo también voy a casarme.

—¿Sí? —murmuró Constanza mecánicamente, por el hábito de responder a aquellas noticias.

—¡Oh! Sí, señora —insistió Maggie— Está todo arreglado. Con el señor Hollins, señora.

—¡No será Hollins, el vendedor ambulante de pescado!

—Sí, señora. Parece ser que le gusto. No recordará usted que estuvimos comprometidos en el 48. Fue mi primer novio, pues. Rompí con él porque estaba con esos cartistas[34] y yo sabía que el señor Baines no lo consentiría. Ahora me ha pedido otra vez. Es viudo desde hace mucho.

—Por supuesto, espero que sea feliz, Maggie. Pero ¿y las costumbres de él?

—Conmigo no tendrá costumbres, señora Povey.

Estaba claro que de la humilde obrera estaba saliendo una mujer.

Cuando Maggie, después de dejar de sollozar, hubo guardado el mantel plegado en el cajón de la mesa y se hubo marchado con la bandeja, su ama volvió a ser con toda franqueza una jovencita. ¡No había en ella porte estirado alguno cuando se quedó sola en la salita, ni simulación de que el aviso de despido de Maggie era un documento cotidiano al que había que echar un vistazo casual como a una factura sin pagar! Se vería obligada a buscar una nueva sirvienta, haciendo solemnes indagaciones de su carácter; a formarla y a hablarle desde alturas desde las cuales nunca se había dirigido a Maggie. En aquel momento tuvo la impresión de que no había más sirvientas adecuadas disponibles en todo el mundo. ¿Y el matrimonio concertado? Pensó que aquella vez —la decimotercera o decimocuarta— el compromiso iba en serio y acabaría en el altar. La visión de Maggie y Hollins ante el altar la escandalizó. El matrimonio era una serie de fenómenos y una situación general, santos y maravillosos en extremo, demasiado sagrados en cierto modo para seres como Maggie y Hollins. Su vaga e instintiva rebelión contra semejante uso del matrimonio se centró en la idea de un fuerte y eterno olor a pescado. Sin embargo, el proyectado ultraje de una institución santificada le preocupó mucho menos que el inminente problema del servicio doméstico.

Fue corriendo a la tienda —o habría ido corriendo si no hubiera contenido a tiempo sus impulsos infantiles—; en sus labios, preparadas para ser vertidas en el oído de un sorprendido esposo, estaban las palabras «¡Maggie se ha despedido! ¡Sí! ¡De verdad!». Pero Samuel Povey estaba ocupado. Se inclinaba sobre el mostrador mirando fijamente un papel desplegado sobre el cual un tal señor Yardley hacía trazos con un grueso lápiz. El señor Yardley, que lucía una larga barba roja, pintaba casas y habitaciones. Ella sólo lo conocía de vista. Mentalmente siempre lo asociaba con el rótulo que campeaba sobre su establecimiento, sito en Trafalgar Road: «Yardley Hnos. Fontaneros autorizados. Pintores. Decoradores. Empapeladores. Escritura

de Rótulos». Durante años, de niña, estuvo pasando por delante de aquel rótulo sin saber qué eran «Hnos.» ni «Rótulos» ni cuál era la misteriosa similitud que existe entre un fontanero y una versión de la Biblia. No podía interrumpir a su marido, ya que estaba plenamente absorto en su tarea, ni podía quedarse en la tienda (que parecía ser sólo un poco más pequeña de lo habitual), pues ello habría significado un infructuoso esfuerzo por enfrentarse a las dependientas como si no le hubiera sucedido nada en especial. De manera que subió sosegadamente la escalera del entresuelo y pasó a los pisos de dormitorios de la casa: ¡su casa! ¡La casa de la señora Povey! Subió incluso al antiguo dormitorio de Constanza —su madre había quitado la ropa de la cama —, que se correspondía todo él, salvo una pequeña disminución de aquella estancia, con la tienda. Después, al salón. En el rincón de detrás de la puerta estaba todavía la negra caja del servicio de plata. Pensaba que su madre se la habría llevado, ¡pero no! Sin duda su madre era una persona que hacía las cosas bien... cuando las hacía. ¡En el salón no se había tocado ni una borla de un tapete! ¡Sí; la pantalla de la chimenea, el cautivador ramo de rosas sobre fondo de mostaza que Constanza había hecho para su madre años atrás había desaparecido! El que de toda la pesada opulencia del salón su madre se hubiera aferrado únicamente a aquel recuerdo emocionó íntimamente a Constanza. Se dio cuenta de que si no podía hablar con su marido tenía que escribir a su madre. Y se sentó ante la mesa ovalada y escribió: «Querida mamá, estoy segura de que te sorprenderá mucho que te diga... Va en serio... Creo que está cometiendo un grave error. ¿Debo poner un anuncio en la *Señal* o bastará con que...? Por favor escribe a vuelta de correo. Ya estamos aquí y lo hemos pasado muy bien. Sam dice que le encanta levantarse tarde...». Y así sucesivamente hasta la última pulgada de la cuarta página festoneada.

Tuvo que volver a la tienda a por un sello, ya que los sellos se guardaban en el pupitre del señor Povey, en el rincón; un pupitre alto que se utilizaba de pie. El señor Povey estaba sumergido en seria conversación con el señor Yardley en la puerta; el crepúsculo, que empezaba en la tienda una hora antes que en la Plaza, arrojaba tenues sombras a los rincones tras los mostradores.

—¿Quiere ir un momento a echar esto al buzón?

—Con mucho gusto, señora Povey.

—¿Adonde va usted? —el señor Povey interrumpió su conversación para detener a la muchacha, que salía a toda prisa.

—Va a echarme una carta —dijo Constanza desde la zona de la caja.

—¡Ah! ¡Está bien!

¡Una insignificancia! ¡Una nadería! Sin embargo, de alguna manera, en la silenciosa tienda vacía de clientes, aquel episodio, con la diferencia apenas perceptible del tono empleado por Samuel en su segunda observación, a Constanza le resultó delicioso.

De alguna manera era el *verdadero* comienzo de su vida como esposa. (Había habido como otros nueve verdaderos comienzos en los quince días anteriores.)

El señor Povey acudió a cenar cargado de libros de contabilidad y otros trabajos que Constanza nunca había pretendido entender. Por parte de él era señal de que la luna de miel había terminado. Ahora era un propietario y su entusiasmo por los libros de contabilidad era muy justificable. Además estaba la cuestión de la sirvienta.

—¡No es posible! —exclamó cuando ella le contó todo acerca del fin del mundo. ¡Un «no es posible» que expresaba el mayor asombro y la más viva preocupación!

Pero Constanza se figuraba que se iba a quedar algo más pasmado, helado, estupefacto, atónito, anonadado. En un rápido destello de perspicacia vio que había corrido peligro de olvidarse de su papel de mujer casada capaz y experimentada.

—Tendré que ponerme a buscar otra —dijo apresuradamente, asumiendo admirablemente un aire de ligera y tranquila despreocupación.

El señor Povey pensaba al parecer que Hollins resultaría muy adecuado para Maggie. No hizo ninguna observación a la novia cuando ésta acudió a la última llamada nocturna de la campanilla.

Abrió sus libros de contabilidad, silbando.

—Creo que me voy arriba, querido —dijo Constanza— Tengo un montón de cosas que guardar.

—Anda —dijo él—; cuando hayas terminado, llamas.

II

—¡Sam! —gritó desde lo alto de la retorcida escalera.

No hubo respuesta. La puerta que había al pie de ésta se encontraba cerrada.

—¡Sam!

—¿Qué?—lejana y débilmente.

—¡Ya he terminado y me voy a dormir!

Y volvió corriendo por el pasillo, una figura blanca en las densas tinieblas, y se metió a toda prisa en la cama, subiéndose el embozo hasta la barbilla.

En la vida de una recién casada hay algunos momentos dramáticos. Si se casa con el industrioso aprendiz, uno de esos momentos tiene lugar cuando ocupa por primera vez la sagrada cámara de sus antepasados y la cama en la que nació. La habitación de sus padres había sido siempre para Constanza, si no sagrada, al menos poseedora de una cierta solemnidad moral. No podía entrar en ella como entraría en otra habitación. El curso de la naturaleza, con su sucesión de muertes, concepciones y nacimientos, hace poco a poco augusta a esa habitación dotándola de una misteriosa cualidad que interpreta la grandeza de la mera existencia y se impone a todo. Constanza tenía las más extrañas sensaciones en aquel lecho, cuya pesada y digna ornamentación simbolizaba una época pasada; sensaciones de sacrilegio y de invasión, de ser una chiquilla traviesa sobre la cual recaería un castigo por aquel hecho insólito y escandaloso. No había vuelto a dormir en aquella cama desde que era muy pequeña, una noche *con* su madre, antes de que su padre sufriera el ataque, estando él fuera. ¡Qué cama tan ilimitada e insondable era entonces! Ahora no era más que una cama —así tenía que decírselo a sí misma— como cualquier otra. La pequeñuela que, sintiéndose segura gracias al contacto con su madre, había dormido en aquella vasta extensión le parecía ahora una personilla patética; su imagen le causaba melancolía. Y su mente se detuvo en la consideración de tristes acontecimientos: la muerte de su padre, la fuga de Sofía; el inmenso pesar y el exilio de su madre. Pensó que sabía lo que era la vida, y que era triste. Y suspiró. Pero el suspiro era afectado, encaminado en parte a convencerla de que era una adulta y en parte a mantener su compostura en el intimidatorio lecho. Aquella melancolía era ficticia, era menos que espuma pasajera en el profundo mar de su alegría. La muerte y la aflicción y el pecado eran para ella unas formas imprecisas; el despiadado egoísmo de la felicidad los hacía desaparecer de un soplo y sus rostros se desvanecían. Viéndola en el lecho, en un marco de caoba y borlas, tendida de costado, con sus juveniles mejillas encendidas y su mirada honesta pero no sin malicia y la opulenta curva de su cadera levantando el cobertor, cualquiera habría dicho que jamás había oído hablar de otra cosa que de amor.

Entró el señor Povey, el recién casado, con rapidez y firmeza, manteniendo el tipo bastante bien pero todavía con timidez. «Al fin y al cabo —estaban tratando de decir sus hombros—¿qué diferencia hay entre esta habitación y la de una casa de huéspedes? En realidad ¿no deberíamos sentirnos más a gusto aquí? ¡Además, maldita sea, llevamos quince días casados!».

—¿No te produce una sensación extraña dormir en esta habitación? A mí sí —dijo Constanza. Las mujeres, hasta las experimentadas, son estúpidamente francas. No tienen decoro ni amor propio.

—¿De verdad? —replicó el señor Povey con altivez, como si dijera: «¡Es increíble que un ser razonable pueda tener tales fantasías! Para mí, esta habitación es exactamente igual que cualquier otra». Y añadió en voz alta, apartando la vista del espejo, ante el que estaba desatándose la corbata:

—No es mala habitación, desde luego —esto, con el aire judicial de un subastador.

Ni por un instante engañó a Constanza, que interpretó con exactitud sus auténticas sensaciones. Pero sus inútiles poses no disminuían en lo más mínimo el respeto que ella le tenía. Por el contrario, le admiraba más por ellas; constituían una especie de bordado en el sólido lienzo de su carácter. En aquella época, a ojos de Constanza no podía hacer nada mal. El fundamento de la consideración en que lo tenía era —pensaba ella

muchas veces— su honradez, la genuina amabilidad de su manera de actuar, su conocimiento del negocio, su perseverancia, su pasión por hacer de inmediato lo que hubiese que hacer. Admiraba en extremo sus cualidades; a su juicio, él era un todo indivisible; no podía admirar una parte de él y desaprobar otra. Hiciera lo que hiciera estaba bien porque lo hacía él. Sabía que a algunas personas les hacían sonreír ciertas fases de su personalidad; sabía que su madre, en lo más hondo de su corazón, albergaba la sospecha de que no había hecho una buena boda, aunque sólo fuera por poco. Pero el saberlo no la perturbaba. No tenía ninguna duda en cuanto a que su propio juicio era correcto.

El señor Povey era una persona extremadamente metódica; era también de las personas que siempre tienen que ir «con anticipación». Así, por la noche dejaba su ropa de modo que pudiera ponérsela por la mañana en el mínimo número posible de minutos. Por ejemplo, no era hombre que dejara el cambio de gemelos de una camisa a otra para por la mañana. Si fuera posible se hubiera cepillado el cabello la noche antes. A Constanza le encantaba ya observar sus minuciosos preparativos. En aquel momento lo vio ir a su antiguo dormitorio y volver con un cuello de papel, que dejó en el tocador junto a una corbata negra. El traje que usaba en la tienda estaba colocado en una silla.

—¡Oh, Sam! —dijo impulsivamente—. ¡No irás a ponerte otra vez esos horrorosos cuellos de papel! —durante el viaje de novios había llevado cuellos de tela.

Su tono era absolutamente amable, pero la observación, sin embargo, mostró una falta de tacto. Implicaba que toda su vida el señor Povey había estado envolviendo su cuello en algo horroroso. Como todas las personas con tendencia a caer en el ridículo, el señor Povey era muy sensible a la crítica personal. Se sonrojó intensamente.

—No sabía que fueran «horrorosos» —dijo bruscamente. Se sentía ofendido y enfadado. El enfado lo había cogido desprevenido.

Los dos vieron de pronto que estaban al borde de un abismo y retrocedieron. ¡Habían imaginado que iban por una pradera florida y allí estaba aquel abismo insondable! Fue muy desconcertante.

La mano del señor Povey quedó suspendida, indecisa, sobre el cuello.

—Sin embargo... —murmuró.

Ella se dio cuenta de que estaba tratando con todas sus fuerzas de ser amable y pacífico. Y se horrorizó de su estúpida torpeza, ¡ella, tan experimentada!

—¡Haz lo que gustes, querido, por favor! —dijo con prontitud.

—¡Oh, no! —e hizo cuanto pudo por sonreír; se fue sin mucho aplomo llevándose el cuello y volvió con otro de tela.

La pasión de Constanza por él ardió con más fuerza que nunca. Entonces supo que no le amaba por sus buenas cualidades sino por algo ingenuo e infantil que había en él, un algo indescriptible que a veces, cuando su rostro estaba cerca del de ella, le producía vértigo.

El abismo había desaparecido. En momentos así, en los que cada uno de los dos tiene que fingir no haber visto el abismo, ni siquiera sospechado su existencia, es esencial la charla intrascendente.

—¿No ha estado el señor Yardley en la tienda esta tarde? —empezó Constanza.

—Sí.

—¿Y qué quería?

—Le mandé aviso. Nos va a pintar un rótulo.

Era inútil que Samuel hiciese como si un rótulo fuera lo más corriente del mundo.

—¡Oh! —murmuró Constanza. No dijo más, ya que el episodio del cuello de papel había debilitado su confianza en sí misma.

¡Pero un rótulo!

Entre sirvientas, abismos y rótulos, Constanza consideró que a su vida de casada no le iba a faltar excitación. Mucho rato después se durmió, pensando en Sofía.

III

Unos días después estaba Constanza colocando sus más preciados regalos de boda en la sala; unos tuvieron que ser envueltos en tela y papel marrón y luego atados con una cuerda y etiquetados; otros tenían sus propias cajas, de cuero por fuera y de terciopelo por dentro. Entre éstos figuraba el resplandeciente servicio de doce hueveras plateadas y doce cucharas cinceladas a juego regalado por la tía Harriet. En frase de las Cinco Ciudades, «debía de haber costado su dinero». Aun cuando el señor y la señora Povey tuvieran diez invitados o diez hijos y a los doce les acometiera al mismo tiempo el deseo de comer huevos en el desayuno o con el té, aun en esa remota contingencia la tía Harriet se hubiera condolido de ver que se usaba dicho servicio; semejantes tesoros no están destinados a ser usados. Los regalos, pocos en número, eran sobre todo de este tipo, pues, debido a la heroica cesión por parte de su madre de todo lo que contenía la casa, Constanza poseía ya todo lo necesario. La escasez de regalos la explicaba el hecho de que la boda había sido estrictamente privada y había tenido lugar en Axe. No hay nada como el secreto en las bodas para desanimar los generosos impulsos de los amigos. Fue la señora Baines, instigada por los dos protagonistas, quien decidió que la boda se celebrara privadamente y en soledad. La boda de Sofía se había celebrado demasiado privadamente y en soledad, pero el correr un velo sobre la de Constanza (cuya unión era irreprochable) justificaba en cierto modo las circunstancias de la de Sofía, indicando de ese modo que la señora Baines creía en las bodas secretas por principio. En aquellos asuntos la señora Baines era capaz de una extraordinaria sutileza.

Y mientras Constanza se ocupaba de sus regalos de boda con la debida seriedad, Maggie fregaba la escalera que conducía desde la acera de King Street hasta la puerta lateral, y la puerta estaba abierta. Era una espléndida mañana de junio.

De improviso, por encima del ruido del fregoteo, Constanza oyó el sordo gruñido de un perro y luego una ronca voz masculina:

—¿*Ta'l* señor, moza?

—Puede que sí, puede que no —se oyó responder a Maggie. No le gustaba nada que la llamaran «moza».

Constanza se dirigió a la puerta, impulsada no sólo por la curiosidad sino también por la sensación de que su autoridad y sus responsabilidades como ama de casa se extendían a la acera que rodeaba la casa.

El famoso James Boon, de Buck Row, el principal criador de perros de las Cinco Ciudades, se hallaba al pie de la escalera: un hombre alto, grueso, vestido de una tela marrón tiesa y llena de manchas; fumaba una pipa de arcilla negra de menos de tres pulgadas de largo. Detrás de él había dos bulldogs.

—¡Buenas, señora! —exclamó Boon alegremente—. Me he *enterao* de *qu'el* señor anda buscando un perro, pudiéramos decir.

—No pienso quedarme aquí con esos animales olisqueándome, ¡de eso nada! —observó Maggie, levantándose.

—¿Que quiere un perro? —Constanza vaciló; sabía que Samuel había aludido vagamente a algo sobre perros; con todo, no se había imaginado que considerase un perro de otro modo que como un hermoso sueño. En aquella casa jamás había puesto la pata un perro, y parecía imposible que lo fuera a hacer alguna vez. ¡Y en cuanto a aquellas bestias de presa que había en la acera...!

—¡Pues sí! —dijo James Boon con toda tranquilidad.

—Le diré que está usted aquí —dijo Constanza—, Pero no sé si está desocupado. Pocas veces lo está a estas horas. Maggie, será mejor que entres.

Constanza entró a paso lento en la tienda, llena de aprensión.

—Sam —musitó a su marido, que estaba escribiendo en su pupitre—, ahí hay un hombre que quiere verte para algo acerca de un perro.

Bien puede decirse que se quedó desconcertado. Sin embargo se condujo con gran presencia de ánimo.

—¡Oh, de un perro! ¿Quién es?

—Es ese Jim Boon. Dice que se ha enterado de que quieres uno.

El célebre nombre de Jim Boon le hizo vacilar, pero tenía que llevar el asunto a término y así lo hizo, aunque con nerviosismo. Constanza fue tras sus agitados pasos hacia la puerta lateral.

—Buenas, Boon.

—Buenas, señor.

Se pusieron a hablar de perros, el señor Povey, por su parte, con la debida precaución.

—¡Pues aquí hay un perro! —exclamó Boon señalando a uno de los bulldogs, un milagro de espléndida fealdad.

—Sí —respondió el señor Povey, no muy sinceramente—. Es precioso. ¿Cuánto vale, así, a ojo?

—Pediría por ella ciento veinte soberanos —dijo Boon—, El otro es un poco más barato: cien.

—¡Oh, Sam! —exclamó ahogadamente Constanza.

Y hasta el señor Povey estuvo a punto de perder el dominio de sí mismo.

—Eso es más de lo que quiero pagar —dijo tímidamente.

—Pero ¡mírela! —insistió Boon, agarrando con rudeza al más caro de los dos animales y poniendo al descubierto sus dientes canibalescos.

El señor Povey movió la cabeza. Constanza apartó la vista.

—No es exactamente el tipo de perro que quiero —dijo el señor Povey.

—¿Un foxterrier?

—Sí, más de ese estilo —asintió ansiosamente el señor Povey.

—¿Cuánto se quiere gastar?

—Oh —dijo con altivez el señor Povey—, no sé.

—¿Diez machacantes?

—Pensaba en algo más barato.

—Bueno, ¿cuánto? Desembuche, señor.

—No más de dos libras —contestó el señor Povey. Habría dicho una libra si se hubiese atrevido. Estaba sorprendido de lo que costaban los perros.

—¡Había *pensao qu'era* un perro lo que quería! —dijo Boon—. Mire, señor, véngase a mi perrera y vea lo que tenemos allí. Y traiga a la señora también. ¿Y qué tal un gato *pa'* la señora? ¿O un pez de colores?

El final del episodio fue que una damita de unos doce meses entró en la familia Povey a prueba. Sus exiguas patas centelleaban de acá para allá por la sala y tenía el aspecto más raro del mundo en ella. Pero era tan confiada, tan cariñosa y tan medrosa y su negra nariz estaba tan helada en aquel tiempo caluroso que Constanza ya la quería con locura al cabo de una hora. El señor Povey estableció unas normas para ella. Le explicó que no debía meterse en la tienda jamás de los jamases. Pero se metió y recibió una tunda que la hizo chillar, y Constanza lloró un instante, sin dejar de admirar la firmeza de su esposo.

Lo del perro no fue todo.

Otro día, Constanza, curioseando en los menores detalles de la sala, encontró una caja de cigarros debajo de la tapa del armonio, encima del teclado. Tenía tan poca costumbre de ver cigarros que al principio no se dio cuenta de lo que era aquello. Su padre no había fumado nunca, ni gustaba de las bebidas

alcohólicas, como tampoco el señor Critchlow. Nadie había fumado nunca en aquella casa, en la cual siempre se había atribuido al tabaco la misma calidad licenciosa que a las cartas, los «juguetes del diablo». Naturalmente, Samuel nunca había fumado en la casa, aunque al ver la caja de cigarros Constanza se acordó de una ocasión en la que su madre había expresado la sospecha incrédula de que el señor Povey, a su regreso de una excursión al mundo un jueves por la tarde, «olía a humo».

Cerró el armonio y no dijo nada.

Aquella misma noche, al entrar de repente en la sala, pilló a Samuel sentado ante el armonio. La tapa cayó con un golpe sonoro que despertó vibraciones por simpatía en todos los rincones de la estancia.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó Constanza, dando un salto.

—Oh, nada —replicó el señor Povey con aire desenfadado.

Estaban engañándose mutuamente: el señor Povey ocultaba su delito y Constanza ocultaba su conocimiento del delito. ¡Falsos, falsos! Pero eso es el matrimonio.

Y al día siguiente Constanza recibió en la tienda la visita de una posible nueva sirvienta, que le había sido recomendada por el señor Holl, el tendero.

—¿Quiere subir por aquí? —le dijo Constanza con cortesía, imbuida del nuevo sentido de lo que era ser la única ama responsable de una casa grande. Guió a la joven a la sala y, al pasar ante la puerta abierta del taller de cortar del señor Povey, llegaron a Constanza la clara visión y el penetrante olor de su marido fumando un cigarro. Estaba en mangas de camisa, cortando tranquilamente, y *Fan* (la señorita de compañía), de vigilancia en un banco, soltó un agudo ladrido a la posible nueva criada.

—Creo que voy a tomar a prueba a esta chica —dijo a Samuel a la hora del té. No dijo nada del cigarro, ni él tampoco.

Aquella tarde, después de cenar, el señor Povey estalló.

—Creo que voy a echar un cigarro. No sabías que fumara, ¿verdad?

De este modo se dejó ver el señor Povey tal cual era, un lechuguino, un vividor y un calavera.

Pero los perros y los cigarros, por desconcertantes que fuesen, resultaron ser, en comparación con el rótulo, cuando éste por fin llegó, como la leche descremada en comparación con el brandy caliente. Fue el rótulo lo que, más sorprendentemente que ninguna otra cosa, señaló el albor de una nueva época en la Plaza de San Lucas. Cuatro hombres tardaron día y medio en colocarlo; usaron escaleras, cuerdas y poleas, y dos de ellos comieron en el plano tejado de plomo de los salientes escaparates. El rótulo tenía treinta y cinco pies de largo y dos de alto; en el centro tenía un semicírculo de unos tres pies de radio; el semicírculo contenía la leyenda, acertadamente dispuesta: «S. Povey y S. Baines, difunto». Todo el rótulo propiamente dicho estaba dedicado a las palabras «John Baines», en letras doradas de un pie y medio de altura sobre fondo verde.

La Plaza lo observaba con asombro y murmuraba: «¡Bueno, Dios nos asista! ¿Adonde vamos a ir a parar?».

Todos coincidieron en que, al dar primordial importancia al nombre de su difunto suegro, el señor Povey había dado muestras de muy buenos sentimientos.

No faltó quien preguntó regodeándose: «¿Qué dirá la anciana señora?».

Constanza se preguntaba lo mismo, pero sin regodearse. Cuando bajaba por la Plaza en dirección a casa apenas podía soportar la vista del rótulo; el pensar en lo que podría decir su madre la llenaba de temor. Era inminente la primera visita oficial de su madre; la iba a acompañar la tía Harriet. Al acercarse el día, Constanza se sentía casi enferma. Cuando insinuó sus aprensiones a Samuel, éste le preguntó como sorprendido:

—¿Es que no se lo has dicho en una de tus cartas?

—¡Oh, no!

—Si no es más que eso —repuso él, echando una bravata—, le escribiré y se lo contaré yo mismo.

Así fue debidamente informada la señora Baines de la existencia del rótulo antes de su llegada. La carta que le escribió a Constanza después de recibir la de Samuel, que era simplemente la afable epístola de un yerno ansioso de ser algo más que correcto, no contenía referencia alguna al rótulo. Este silencio, sin embargo, no alivió en lo más mínimo las aprensiones de Constanza en cuanto a lo que podría ocurrir cuando su madre y Samuel se encontraran bajo el propio rótulo. Fue por tanto con el corazón lleno de temor, aunque también de amor y anhelo, como abrió la puerta lateral y bajó corriendo la escalera cuando el carricoche se detuvo en King Street la mañana del jueves, día de la gran visita de las hermanas. Pero le aguardaba una sorpresa. La tía Harriet no había venido. La señora Baines explicó, mientras besaba ruidosamente a su hija, que en el último momento la tía Harriet no se había sentido lo bastante bien como para emprender el viaje. Enviaba todo su afecto y un pastel. Estaba otra vez con sus dolores. Eran aquellos misteriosos dolores los que habían impedido a las hermanas ir antes a Bursley. Habían tenido la palabra «cáncer» —continuo terror de las mujeres gruesas— en la punta de la lengua, pero no llegaron a pronunciarla; luego hubo una remisión y las dos se alegraron de haberse abstenido de mencionar aquellas terribles sílabas. En vista de la recaída, no era de extrañar que la enérgica locuacidad de la señora Baines fuera un tanto forzada.

—¿Qué crees que es? —inquirió Constanza.

La señora Baines alargó los labios y levantó las cejas, un gesto que significaba que sabe Dios lo que podían significar los dolores.

—Espero que esté bien, sola —observó Constanza.

—Por supuesto —respondió rápidamente la señora Baines—. Pero no creerías que te iba a decepcionar, ¿verdad? —añadió, mirando en torno suyo como para desafiar a los hados en general.

Este discurso y el tono en que fue pronunciado produjo gran placer a Constanza; cargadas de paquetes subieron la escalera juntas, muy contentas la una con la otra, muy felices de descubrir que seguían siendo madre e hija, muy unidas tácitamente.

Constanza había imaginado conversaciones largas, detalladas, absorbentes y muy novedosas entre ella y su madre en aquel su primer encuentro después de casarse. Pero, a solas en el dormitorio y con media hora entera antes de la cena, ninguna de las dos tenía al parecer gran cosa que comunicar a la otra.

La señora Baines se quitó pausadamente la ligera manteleta y la dejó con cuidado sobre el cubrecama de damasco blanco. Después, jugueteando con su atavío de luto, recorrió la habitación con la mirada. Nada había cambiado. Aunque Constanza, antes de casarse, había ideado algunas alteraciones, había decidido aplazarlas, pensando que con un revolucionario en casa había suficiente.

—Y bien, hija mía, ¿estás bien? —dijo la señora Baines con directa y cordial energía, mirando a su hija a los ojos.

Constanza percibió que la pregunta era universal de puro general, la única manera que tenía su madre para expresar su preocupación y curiosidad maternales, y que condensaba en seis palabras un interés tan grande como el que hubiera rebosado en un día entero de charla en algunas madres. Sus ojos se encontraron con aquella sincera mirada y se sonrojó:

—¡Oh, sí! —respondió con un fervor extático—, ¡Estupendamente!

Y la señora Baines asintió con la cabeza, como si desechase aquello.

—Has engordado —dijo cortante—. Si no tienes cuidado te vas a poner como nosotras.

—¡Oh, mamá!

La entrevista descendió a un plano emocional más bajo. Descendió incluso hasta Maggie. Lo que más preocupaba a Constanza era el cambio sutil que observaba en su madre. La encontraba maniática con las nimiedades. Su manera de dejar la manteleta y de alisar los guantes, su preocupación porque el gorrito no sufriera daños, eran algo desquiciante, incluso lamentable. No era nada; era casi imperceptible, y sin embargo bastaba para alterar la actitud mental de Constanza hacia ella. «Me temo que ya no es la que era». ¡Le parecía

increíble que su madre hubiera envejecido en menos de seis semanas! Constanza no contó con la química que había venido actuando sobre ella misma.

El encuentro entre la señora Baines y su yerno fue de lo más satisfactorio. Éste estaba esperando en la sala a que bajase. Fue muy agradable con ella; le dio un beso y la halagó con un deseo de complacer visiblemente sincero. Explicó que estaba pendiente de la llegada del carricoche pero habían reclamado su presencia. Su «¡Dios mío!» al enterarse de lo de la tía Harriet no carecía en absoluto de convicción, aunque las dos mujeres sabían que su afecto por la tía Harriet nunca ganaría la batalla a su razón. Para Constanza, la conducta de su marido fue maravillosamente perfecta. No se había imaginado que fuese aquel hombre de mundo. Y sus ojos dijeron a su madre de un modo totalmente inconsciente: «Ya ves, al fin y al cabo, no tenías tan buena opinión de Sam como hubieras debido. Ahora ves que estabas equivocada».

Mientras aguardaban la cena, Constanza y la señora Baines sentadas en el sofá y Samuel en el borde de la mecedora más próxima, se oyó un ruidillo de algo que correteaba al otro lado de la puerta que daba a la escalera de la cocina, se abrió la puerta y *Fan* se precipitó en la habitación con aire de importancia, descolocando las esteras. La nariz de *Fan* le había indicado que estaba atrasada de noticias y no se había puesto al día en los asuntos de la familia, y había ido corriendo desde la cocina para hacer indagaciones. Por el camino se acordó de que aquella mañana la habían bañado. La visión de la señora Baines la detuvo. Se quedó allí, con las patas muy estiradas, la nariz levantada, las orejas tiesas, los brillantes ojos chispeantes y el rabo indeciso. «Ya sabía yo que nunca había olido nada como eso», se decía mientras miraba fijamente a la señora Baines.

Y la señora Baines, mirando fijamente a *Fan,* tuvo una idea parecida aunque no el mismo sentimiento. Se produjo un terrible silencio. Constanza adoptó una actitud culpable; Sam, evidentemente, había perdido sus modales espontáneos de hombre de mundo.

¡Un perro!

De repente el rabo de *Fan* empezó a agitarse con mayor rapidez; después, habiendo buscado en vano el estímulo de su amo y de su ama, dio un vigoroso salto y aterrizó en el regazo de la señora Baines. Era un blanco imposible de errar. Constanza dejó escapar un «¡Oh, *Fan!*» teñido de escandalizado terror y Samuel traicionó su tensión nerviosa con un movimiento involuntario. Pero *Fan* se había acomodado en aquel titánico regazo como si fuese el paraíso. Aquello era un halago mayor que los del señor Povey.

—¡Así que te llamas *Fan!* —murmuró la señora Baines, acariciando al animal—, ¡Eres una monada!

—¿A que sí? —dijo Constanza con increíble celeridad.

El peligro había pasado. De aquel modo, sin necesidad de explicaciones, se convirtió *Fan* en un hecho consumado.

Al cabo de un momento, Maggie sirvió el budín de Yorkshire.

—Bueno, Maggie —dijo la señora Baines—, ¿de manera que esta vez te casas? ¿Cuándo va a ser?

—El domingo, señora.

—¿Y te vas de aquí al sábado?

—Sí, señora.

—Bien, tengo que tener una charla contigo antes de que te marches.

Durante la comida, ¡ni una palabra sobre el rótulo! Varias veces se acercó a él la conversación de la manera más alarmante, pero invariablemente se volvió a alejar, como un tren se aleja de otro cuando los dos salen al mismo tiempo de una estación. Los temores de Constanza fueron tan grandes que anularon su preocupación por la cocina. Al final comprendió que su madre había adoptado una actitud de callada desaprobación. *Fan* fue muy útil socialmente todo aquel tiempo.

Después de comer, Constanza estaba que no vivía temiendo que Samuel encendiera un cigarro. No le había pedido que no lo hiciera, pues aunque estaba totalmente segura de su cariño, ya se había dado cuenta de que un marido está poseído por un demonio de la contradicción que con frecuencia lo obligaba a violar sus sentimientos más elevados. Sin embargo, Samuel no encendió cigarro alguno. Se fue a supervisar el cierre de la tienda mientras la señora Baines charlaba con Maggie y le daba cinco libras como regalo de bodas. Luego acudió el señor Critchlow a ofrecerle sus respetos.

Poco antes del té la señora Baines anunció que saldría sola a dar un corto paseo.

—¿Adonde ha ido? —preguntó Sam con una sonrisa de superioridad, al verla por la ventana volver la esquina de King Street, en dirección a la iglesia.

—Me imagino que a visitar la tumba de papá —dijo Constanza.

—¡Oh! —exclamó Sam como disculpándose.

Constanza estaba equivocada. Antes de llegar a la iglesia, la señora Baines se desvió hacia la derecha, entró en Brougham Street y desde allí, pasando por Acre Lane, a Oldcastle Street, cuya cuesta subió. Ahora bien, Oldcastle Street termina en la parte alta de la Plaza de San Lucas; desde la esquina la señora Baines obtuvo una excelente vista del rótulo. Como era jueves por la tarde, apenas se veía un alma. Volvió a casa de su hija por la misma extraordinaria ruta y no dijo ni palabra al entrar. Pero estaba notablemente animada.

Llegó el carricoche después del té y la señora Baines hizo sus últimos preparativos de marcha. La visita había resultado ser un éxito fabuloso; habría sido absolutamente perfecta si Samuel no la hubiera estropeado en la puerta misma del carricoche. Sólo una persona de la congénita torpeza de Samuel habría mencionado la navidad en el mes de julio.

—¡Ya sabe que pasará la navidad con nosotros! —dijo dirigiéndose al interior del vehículo.

—¡Nada de eso! La tía Harriet y yo os esperamos en Axe. Ya lo hemos decidido así.

El señor Povey torció el gesto.

—¡Oh, no! —protestó, ofendido por aquel estilo sumario.

Como no tenía parientes excepto su primo el repostero, durante años había soñado con tener por fin una navidad familiar bajo su propio techo; aquel sueño le era muy caro.

La señora Baines no dijo nada.

—No nos sería posible dejar la tienda —dijo el señor Povey.

—¡Tonterías! —replicó la señora Baines apretando los labios—. El día de navidad cae en lunes.

El carricoche, al arrancar, imprimió una sacudida a su cabeza e hizo temblar todos sus rizos. ¡Aún no había canas en aquellos rizos, apenas un toque de gris!

—Ya me cuidaré yo de que no vayamos de todos modos —farfulló acalorado el señor Povey, en parte para sí mismo, en parte para Constanza.

Había estropeado la luminosidad de aquel día.

Capitulo II

LA NAVIDAD Y EL FUTURO

I

El señor Povey tocaba un himno en el armonio; se había decidido que no fuese nadie a la capilla. Constanza, de luto, con un delantal blanco encima del vestido, ocupaba un escabel delante de la chimenea; cerca de ella, en una mecedora, la señora Baines se balanceaba suavemente. Hacía mucho frío. La manos enmitonadas del señor Povey estaban amoratadas, pero, como muchos tenderos, se había vuelto al parecer casi insensible a los caprichos de la temperatura. Aunque el fuego era enorme y ardía con furia, su influencia, debido al hecho de que aquella chimenea medieval estaba concebida para calentar el tiro en vez de la habitación, parecía extinguirse en los bordes del guardafuegos. Constanza habría tenido que ser una salamandra para poder estar más cerca de él. La época de las buenas navidades anticuadas, tan gratamente pintorescas para los pobres, aún no había llegado a su fin.

Sí; Samuel Povey había ganado la batalla referente a la sede de la navidad familiar. Pero había tenido la ayuda de un aliado formidable, la muerte. Harriet Maddack había fallecido, tras una operación, dejando su casa y su dinero a su hermana. El solemne rito de su entierro había afectado profundamente a todas las personas respetables de la ciudad de Axe, donde la señora Maddack era todo un personaje; hasta se había cerrado la tienda de la Plaza de San Lucas durante todo un día. Fue el suyo un funeral que la propia tía Harriet habría aprobado, un ceremonial tremendo que dejó en el abatido espíritu una imborrable y compleja impresión de tela brillante, crespón, caballos con el cuello arqueado y largas crenchas, párrocos, pastel, oporto, suspiros y cristiana sumisión a los inescrutables designios de la Providencia. La señora Baines se había comportado con una calma poco natural hasta que el funeral hubo concluido; entonces Constanza se dio cuenta de que la madre que recordaba de su infancia ya no existía. Para la mayoría de las almas humanas habría sido más fácil querer a una montaña que a la tía Harriet, que sin duda alguna tenía menos de mujer que de institución. Pero la señora Baines la quería; era la única persona a la que la señora Baines acudía en busca de apoyo y guía. Cuando murió, la señora Baines le rindió homenaje de respeto con las últimas reservas de su orgullosa fortaleza y confesó llorosa que la invencible había sido vencida; la inagotable, agotada; y envejeció; sus cabellos encanecían.

Había insistido en su negativa a pasar la navidad en Bursley, pero Constanza y Samuel sabían que su resistencia era solamente formal. Pronto cedió. Cuando a la segunda nueva sirvienta de Constanza se le metió en la cabeza irse una semana antes de navidad, la señora Baines podría haber indicado que el dedo de la Providencia actuaba de nuevo, y aquella vez en su favor. ¡Pero no! Con asombrosa docilidad sugirió que se traería a una de sus propias criadas para «echar una mano» a Constanza. Fue recibida con todas las muestras posibles de amorosa solicitud; incluso se encontró con que su hija y su yerno habían desocupado el dormitorio principal para cedérselo. Profundamente halagada por esta atención (que había sido una magnánima idea del señor Povey), protestó no obstante con calor. Hasta dijo que «no quería ni hablar de ello».

—Pero mamá, no seas tonta —había dicho Constanza con firmeza— No querrás que nos pongamos a cambiarlo todo otra vez, ¿verdad? —Y la señora Baines se había rendido entre lágrimas.

Así llegó la navidad. Tal vez fue una suerte que, al no ser en modo alguno la sirvienta de Axe lo que se entiende normalmente por una sirvienta, sino una benefactora que está donde se necesita una benefactora, Constanza y su madre resolvieron ocuparse ellas mismas del trabajo de la casa, prescindiendo de la benefactora todo lo posible. Por eso llevaba Constanza un delantal blanco.

—¡Ahí está! —exclamó el señor Povey, aún tocando pero mirando a la calle.

Constanza se puso en pie de un salto, ansiosamente. Se oyó llamar a la puerta. Constanza abrió y una ráfaga de aire helado se coló en la habitación. En la escalera estaba el cartero, con su instrumento para llamar en una mano (una especie de palillo de tambor), un gran paquete de cartas en la otra y una bolsa abierta cruzándole el estómago.

—¡Feliz navidad, señora! —exclamó el cartero, tratando de entrar en calor a base de jovialidad.

Constanza tomó las cartas y respondió, mientras el señor Povey, sin dejar de tocar el armonio con la mano derecha sacaba media corona del bolsillo con la izquierda.

—¡Toma! —dijo alargándosela a Constanza, que se la dio al cartero.

Fan, que estaba en el sofá calentándose el morro con la punta de la cola, saltó al suelo para supervisar la transacción.

—¡Brrr! —vibró el señor Povey cuando Constanza cerró la puerta.

—¡Hala, vosotros! —exclamó Constanza, corriendo hacia la chimenea—¡Ven, mamá! ¡Ven, Sam!

La muchacha había recuperado la posesión del cuerpo de la mujer.

Aunque la familia Baines tenía pocos amigos (pues en aquellos tiempos se practicaba poco la hospitalidad continuada), tenían, naturalmente, muchos conocidos y, como otras familias, contaban sus felicitaciones navideñas como los indios cuentan las cabelleras. El recuento fue satisfactorio. Había entre veinte y treinta misivas. Constanza sacó rápidamente las tarjetas, leyó en voz alta su contenido y después los colocó sobre la repisa de la chimenea. La señora Baines la ayudó. *Fan* se ocupó de los sobres, en el suelo. El señor Povey, para dejar bien claro que su alma estaba por encima de juguetes y chucherías, siguió tocando el armonio.

—¡Oh, mamá! —murmuró Constanza con voz sobresaltada y vacilante y con un sobre en la mano.

—¿Qué pasa, hija mía?

—Es...

El sobre estaba dirigido a «Sra. y Srta. Baines» en grandes caracteres perpendiculares y elegantes que Constanza reconoció inmediatamente como la letra de Sofía. Los sellos eran desconocidos y el matasellos decía «París». La señora Baines se inclinó hacia delante y lo miró.

—Ábrelo, niña —dijo.

El sobre contenía una tarjeta navideña inglesa de tipo corriente, una rama de acebo con expresiones de felicitación, y en ella se leía: «Espero que os llegue la mañana de navidad. Muchos besos». No llevaba firma ni remite.

La señora Baines la cogió con mano temblorosa y se ajustó las gafas. La contempló largo rato.

—¡Y ha llegado! —exclamó, echándose a llorar.

Intentó hablar otra vez, pero como no podía dominarse tendió la felicitación a Constanza y movió la cabeza en dirección al señor Povey. Constanza se levantó y puso la tarjeta en el teclado del armonio.

—¡Sofía! —susurró.

El señor Povey dejó de tocar.

—¡Dios mío, Dios mío! —musitó.

Fan, al ver que nadie se interesaba por sus proezas, se quedó súbitamente inmóvil.

La señora Baines intentó hablar una vez más pero no pudo. Después, con los rizos temblándole debajo de la banda de luto, consiguió ponerse en pie, se acercó al armonio y, con un movimiento casi convulsivo, arrebató la tarjeta al señor Povey y regresó a su asiento.

El señor Povey salió bruscamente de la habitación, seguido por *Fan.* Las dos mujeres lloraban y él se sintió enormemente sorprendido al descubrir un peligroso nudo en su propia garganta. ¡La bella e imperiosa imagen de Sofía, de Sofía cuando los abandonó, inocente, caprichosa, se había perfilado de inmediato ante él y lo había convertido en mujer incluso a él! Sin embargo, Sofía nunca le había agradado. La terrible y secreta herida infligida al orgullo familiar se le reveló como nunca con anterioridad y sintió intensamente la tragedia de la madre, que ésta llevaba en su seno como la tía Harriet había llevado un cáncer.

A la hora de comer dijo de pronto a la señora Baines, que seguía llorando:

—Ahora, madre, tiene que animarse, ya sabe.

—Sí, es verdad —dijo rápidamente. Y lo hizo.

Ni Samuel ni Constanza volvieron a ver la tarjeta navideña. Se habló poco. No había nada que decir. Dado que Sofía no había puesto remite, no cabía duda de que seguía estando avergonzada por su situación. Pero había pensado en su madre y en su hermana. Ella..., ella ni siquiera sabía que Constanza se había casado... ¿Cómo sería París? Para Bursley, París no era más que la sede de una gran exposición recientemente clausurada.

Por medio de la influencia de la señora Baines se encontró una nueva sirvienta para Constanza en un pueblo cerca de Axe, una muchacha bonita e inexperta que no había estado nunca en «una casa». Y por medio del correo se acordó que aquella inocente acudiese a la cueva el treinta y uno de diciembre. Obedeciendo a la norma según la cual nunca debía permitirse a los criados que se reuniesen para cambiar impresiones, la señora Baines decidió partir el treinta con su criada. No hubo manera de convencerla de que se quedara a pasar el Año Nuevo en la Plaza. El veintinueve murió de repente la pobre tía María en su casita de Brougham Street. Todo el mundo lo sintió como debía; especialmente la actitud afligida de la señora Baines dejó ver el no va más de la corrección. Pero dio a entender que no se quedaría para el funeral. Sus nervios no estarían a la altura de la dura prueba; además, ni su sirvienta debía estar allí para corromper a la chica nueva ni la señora Baines podía pensar en mandarla por delante a Axe para que pasara varios días en ociosos chismorreos con su compañera.

Esta decisión dejó sin su plato fuerte al funeral de la tía María, que fue el colmo de la modestia: una carroza fúnebre y un coche de un solo caballo. El señor Povey estaba contento, pues coincidió con días muy atareados para él. Una hora antes de la marcha de su suegra entró en la sala con la prueba de un cartel.

—¿Qué es eso, Samuel? —preguntó la señora Baines, sin imaginarse el golpe que la esperaba.

—Es para mis primeras rebajas anuales —respondió el señor Povey con fingida tranquilidad.

La señora Baines se limitó a sacudir la cabeza. Constanza, afortunadamente para ella, no estaba presente en aquella derrota final del antiguo orden. De haber estado allí, podemos tener por seguro que no habría sabido a dónde mirar.

II

—¡El año que viene, cuarenta! —exclamó un día el señor Povey, con una expresión y un tono que eran al mismo tiempo de seriedad y de parodia de la seriedad. Era el día que cumplía treinta y nueve años.

Constanza se sobresaltó. Naturalmente, se daba cuenta de que se iban haciendo mayores, pero nunca había parado mientes en dicho fenómeno. Aunque los clientes observaban de vez en cuando que el señor Povey estaba más grueso; aunque cuando le ayudaba a medirse para hacerse un traje nuevo la cinta métrica daba prueba de ello, para ella no había cambiado. Sabía que ella también había engordado un poco, pero para ella seguía siendo exactamente la misma. Sólo rememorando fechas y mediante cálculos pudo realmente comprender que se había casado hacía poco más de seis años más poco menos de seis meses. Tuvo que admitir que, si Samuel iba a cumplir los cuarenta en su siguiente cumpleaños, ella iba a cumplir veintisiete. Pero no serían veintisiete de verdad, ni los de Samuel serían cuarenta de verdad, como los veintisiete y los cuarenta de los demás. No hacía mucho tiempo, un hombre de cuarenta le parecía un viejales, casi con un pie en la tumba.

Reflexionó, y cuanto más reflexionaba más claramente veía que, después de todo, los almanaques no mentían. ¡Fijaos en Fan! Sí; ya habrían pasado cinco años desde la memorable mañana en que, por primera vez, a Samuel y a Sofía se les pasaron dudas por la cabeza en cuanto a los principios morales de *Fan.* El entusiasmo de Samuel por los perros era igualado por su desconocimiento de los peligros a los cuales puede estar expuesta una hembra joven de temperamento, y se sintió muy perturbado cuando la duda se convirtió en certidumbre. *Fan* fue en realidad la única que no se sintió conmocionada ni abrigó temores en cuanto a las consecuencias. El animal, que tenía una mente pura, carecía de pudor. ¡Diversas enormidades había cometido, pero ninguna como ésta! Las consecuencias fueron cuatro cuadrúpedos reconocibles como fox-terriers. El señor Povey respiró de nuevo. *Fan* había tenido más suerte de la que merecía, pues las consecuencias podrían haber sido cualquier cosa. Sus dueños la perdonaron y luego la casaron legalmente con un marido de tan alta

posición que podía pedir dote. Y ahora *Fan* era abuela y por la ciudad había varios nietos suyos diseminados. *Fan* era una perra tranquila y desilusionada. Conocía el mundo tal como era y al aprenderlo había enseñado mucho a sus dueños.

Luego estaba Maggie Hollins. Constanza aún recordaba con claridad la timidez con que en cierta ocasión había recibido a Maggie y al heredero de los Hollins, pero había pasado mucho tiempo. Después de sorprender a media ciudad con la producción de aquel niño (de la cual casi se muere), Maggie permitió que los ángeles se lo llevaran al cielo; todo el mundo dijo que debería estar muy agradecida, a su edad. Las viejas desenterraron de su memoria olvidadas historias de las excentricidades de la diosa Lucina. La señora Baines, curiosamente, mostró gran interés; hablaba de ello con toda libertad a Constanza, quien principió a darse cuenta de lo increíble que había sido siempre Bursley, ¡y ella sin imaginárselo! Maggie tenía ahora otros hijos; era la arrastrada y renqueante señora de un hogar beodo y aparentaba sesenta años. A pesar de su profecía, su marido había conservado sus «costumbres». Los Povey comían todo el pescado que podían y varias veces más del que les hubiera gustado comer, porque, cuando estaba sobrio Hollins, iniciaba invariablemente su ronda por la tienda y Constanza tenía que comprar por Maggie. Lo peor del indigno esposo era que raras veces dejaba de mostrarse risueño y cortés. Nunca olvidaba preguntar por la salud de la señora Baines. Y cuando Constanza respondía que su madre estaba «bastante bien, después de todo», pero que no volvería a Bursley hasta que se inaugurase el ferrocarril de Axe, pues no podía soportar el viaje en carricoche, sacudía la canosa cabeza y se ponía compasivamente melancólico por un momento.

¡Tantos cambios en seis años! Los calendarios tenían razón.

Pero a ella no le había ocurrido nada. Poco a poco había llegado a ejercer un firme ascendiente sobre su madre, aunque sin procurarlo, simplemente como resultado de la influencia del tiempo sobre ella y sobre su madre respectivamente. Poco a poco había obtenido habilidad y costumbre en la dirección de la casa y de su parte de la tienda, de modo que aquellas máquinas funcionaban eficazmente y sobre ruedas y un repentino contratiempo ya no la asustaba. Poco a poco se había ido haciendo un mapa de la personalidad de Samuel, con los arrecifes sumergidos y las corrientes peligrosas señalados con precisión, de modo que ahora podía viajar por aquellos mares sin alarmas. Pero no sucedía nada. ¡A menos que se pudiera llamar «sucesos» a sus visitas a Buxton! Decididamente, la visita a Buxton era la única montañita que sobresalía en la lisa llanura del año. Habían adoptado la costumbre de ir a pasar diez días en Buxton cada año. Solían decir: «Sí, siempre vamos a Buxton. Fuimos allí de viaje de novios, ¿sabe?». Habían llegado a ser unos empedernidos buxtonenses, con opiniones sobre la Terraza de Santa Ana, el Paseo Ancho y la Caverna de Peel. Ni en sueños podían abandonar su Buxton. Era el único lugar de vacaciones que existía. ¿Acaso no era la ciudad más alta de Inglaterra? ¡Pues entonces! Siempre se alojaban en el mismo sitio y acabaron por ser los huéspedes favoritos de la dueña, que contaba en susurros a todos los demás que habían estado en su casa en viaje de novios, que no faltaban ningún año y que eran personas muy situadas y respetables propietarias de un importante negocio. Todos los años salían a pie de la estación de Buxton detrás de su equipaje, que iba en un baúl, llenos de alegría y orgullo porque conocían todos los monumentos y sabían dónde estaban todas las calles y cuáles eran las mejores tiendas.

Al principio, la idea de dejar la tienda a una custodia mercenaria les había parecido casi una fantasía y los preparativos para la ausencia fueron muy complicados. Fue entonces cuando la señorita Insull se distinguió de las otras dependientas como una persona en la que se podía confiar totalmente. La señorita Insull era mayor que Constanza; tenía mala tez y no era inteligente, pero era de esas personas de las que se puede uno fiar. Aquellos seis años habían sido testigos de la lenta e incesante ascensión de la señorita Insull. Sus empleadas decían «señorita Insull» con un tono totalmente distinto del que utilizaban para decir «señorita Hawkins» o «señorita Dadd». «Señorita Insull» equivalía al final de una discusión. «Mejor dígaselo a la señorita Insull», «la señorita Insull se ocupará de eso», «preguntaré a la señorita Insull». La señorita Insull dormía en la casa diez noches al año. La señorita Insull había sido llamada a consultas cuando se decidió contratar a una cuarta persona en forma de aprendiza.

El comercio había mejorado hasta llegar a ser excelente. Ahora se admitía que iba bien, ¡un raro honor para el comercio! El auge de la minería del carbón estaba en su punto máximo; los mineros, además de emborracharse, compraban órganos americanos y costosos perros bullterrier. Con frecuencia acudían a la tienda a comprar paño para hacer mantitas a sus perros. Y querían buen paño. Al señor Povey esto no le gustaba. Un día, un minero eligió para su perro el mejor paño que había en la tienda del señor Povey, a doce chelines la yarda. «¿La hará usted? Tengo las medidas», le preguntó el minero. «¡No, no quiero hacerla!», respondió acalorado el señor Povey. «Y, lo que es más, tampoco quiero venderle la tela! ¡Vamos, un paño de doce chelines la yarda en el lomo de un perro! ¡Le agradeceré que salga de mi tienda!». El incidente hizo historia en la Plaza. Dejó definitivamente bien sentado que el señor Povey era un digno yerno y un hombre firme y de éxito. Confirmaba la antigua preeminencia de «Casa Baines». Se expresó cierta sorpresa por el hecho de que el señor Povey no manifestase deseo de entrar en la vida pública de la ciudad ni inclinación a

ello. Pero nunca lo hizo, aunque en privado era un agudo crítico satírico de la junta local. Y en la capilla siguió siendo un feligrés privado, rechazando toda clase de cargos administrativos.

III

¿Era feliz Constanza? Desde luego, siempre tenía algo en la cabeza, algo de lo que tenía que ocuparse, en la tienda o en la casa, algo que requería toda la destreza y experiencia que había obtenido. En su vida había mucho tedio laborioso, tedio inacabable y monótono. Y tanto ella como Samuel trabajaban por lo tanto mucho, levantándose temprano, «empujando», como se decía, y yéndose a dormir temprano de puro cansancio; una semana tras otra, un mes tras otro, mientras una estación dejaba paso imperceptiblemente a otra. En junio y julio se retiraban algunas veces antes de que desapareciera del cielo el postrer tinte plateado del crepúsculo. Se echaban en la cama y hablaban plácidamente de sus asuntos cotidianos. Llegaba un ruido de la calle, allá abajo. «¡Ya cierran las Bodegas!», decía Samuel, y bostezaba. «Sí; es muy tarde», decía Constanza. Y el reloj suizo daba velozmente las once en su muelle sonoro. Y después, justo antes de quedarse dormida, Constanza reflexionaba acerca de su destino, como hacen hasta las mujeres más ocupadas y sin complicaciones, y decidía que era un destino amable. La gradual decadencia y la solitaria vida de su madre en Axe la entristecían. Las tarjetas que mandaba ahora Sofía de tiempo en tiempo, a intervalos muy largos, habían sido motivo más de pesar que de alegría. Los ingenuos éxtasis de su adolescencia habían desaparecido hacía mucho: era el precio de la experiencia y de la serenidad, y de la verdadera visión de las cosas. La vasta melancolía inherente a todo el universo no hacía una excepción con ella. Pero a punto de dormirse era consciente de un vago contento. Este contento tenía su base en el hecho de que ella y Samuel se comprendían y estimaban mutuamente y contaban el uno con el otro. Sus caracteres habían sido puestos a prueba y la habían superado. El afecto, el amor, no era para ellos un fenómeno destacado en sus relaciones. La costumbre había empañado inevitablemente su brillo. Era como un sabor que apenas se recuerda; pero si no existiera, ¡cómo habrían rechazado aquel plato!

Samuel nunca o casi nunca se ponía a meditar sobre el problema de si la vida había estado o no a la altura de sus expectativas. Pero a veces tenía extrañas sensaciones que no entraba a analizar y que se acercaban más al éxtasis que a un sentimiento como los de Constanza. Así, cuando le sobrevenía uno de sus ataques de sombría furia, fundida por dentro y negra por fuera, el pensar de pronto en la calma benévola e inalterable de su mujer podía infundirle una frialdad asombrosa. A sus ojos, ella era increíblemente femenina. Ponía unas flores en la repisa de la chimenea y luego, al cabo de unas horas, mientras comían, le preguntaba inesperadamente qué le parecía su «jardín»; él fue adivinando poco a poco que una respuesta sólo por cumplir la dejaría insatisfecha; quería una opinión sincera, eso era lo que importaba para ella. ¡Hay que ver, llamar «jardín» a unas flores sobre la repisa de la chimenea! ¡Qué encantador, qué pueril! Y tenía la costumbre, los domingos por la mañana, cuando bajaba a la sala, ya preparada para ir a la capilla, de cerrar la puerta al pie de la escalera con un ligero portazo, estremecerse y darse la vuelta con celeridad como para ofrecerse a su inspección, como si dijera «Bueno, ¿qué tal? ¿Voy bien así?». Un fenómeno que él siempre asociaba con el olor de los guantes de cabritilla. Ella le consultaba invariablemente acerca del color y el corte de sus vestidos. ¿Preferiría éste o aquél? No fue capaz de tomarse en serio aquellas cuestiones hasta que un día le hizo casualmente una indicación, una simple indicación, de que no le entusiasmaba determinado traje nuevo suyo, el primero después de abandonar definitivamente el luto. Nunca volvió a ponérselo. Al principio le pareció que no iba en serio y la reconvino por llevar la broma demasiado lejos. Ella dijo: «No sirve de nada lo que digas. Ya no me lo voy a poner más». Y entonces se hizo cargo de que iba en serio, y hasta tal punto que evitó, por discreción, cualquier comentario. El incidente le tuvo preocupado varios días. Le halagaba, le emocionaba, pero le dejaba perplejo. ¡Qué extraño que una mujer sujeta a tales caprichos fuera tan sagaz, competente y absolutamente responsable como Constanza! Su lado práctico y su sentido común suscitaban permanentemente su admiración. La primerísima muestra que dio de estas cualidades —su insistencia en que la ausencia de los dos a la vez de la tienda durante media hora o una hora dos veces al día no iba a acarrear el inmediato hundimiento del negocio— había permanecido grabada en su memoria. Si no hubiera sido tan obstinada —a su manera benévola— en su oposición a la vieja superstición que él había adquirido de sus patronos, se habrían pasado la vida comiendo cada uno por su lado. Por otra parte, consideraba que la forma en que había llevado a su madre los meses del asedio de París, durante los cuales la señora Baines estuvo convencida de que su pecadora hija estaba en constante peligro de muerte, había sido muy sutil. Y lo que vino después, una tarjeta con ocasión del cumpleaños de Constanza, justificó plenamente su actitud.

En ocasiones un estúpido metepatas les decía jovialmente: —¿Qué hay de ese bebé?

O una mujer observaba en voz baja:

—Muchas veces me da pena que no tengan ustedes hijos.

Y ellos contestaban que en realidad no sabrían qué hacer con un bebé. ¡Entre la tienda, y esto y lo otro...! Y eran totalmente sinceros.

IV

Es de notar cómo una menudencia puede hacer que hasta las personas más serias y metódicas se salgan de sus más inveterados hábitos. Una mañana, en marzo, un velocípedo, nada más que dos ruedas de madera unidas por una barra de hierro, en medio de las cuales iba un sillín de madera, perturbó la gravedad de la Plaza de San Lucas. Cierto que era quizá el primer velocípedo que jamás hubiera atentado contra la gravedad de la Plaza de San Lucas. Salió de la tienda de Daniel Povey, el repostero y panadero y famoso primo de Samuel, en Boulton Terrace. Dicha calle formaba casi un ángulo recto con el local de los Baines y en la esquina de ese ángulo empezaban Wedgwood Street y King Street. Conducía el artilugio Dick Povey, hijo único de Daniel y a la sazón de once años, bajo la supervisión de su padre; la Plaza pronto se dio cuenta de que Dick poseía un talento natural para domar un velocípedo sin amaestrar. Después de unos cuantos intentos pudo mantenerse en la parte trasera de la máquina al menos diez yardas; sus proezas tuvieron como efecto el dotar a la Plaza de San Lucas del atractivo de un circo. Samuel Povey lo contemplaba con sincero interés emboscado en su puerta, mientras las infortunadas dependientas, aun sabiendo el espectáculo que se veía en la calle, no se atrevían a moverse de la estufa. Samuel se sentía enormemente tentado a hacer una osada salida y charlar con su primo acerca de aquel juguete; tenía sin duda más derecho a hacerlo que cualquier otro comerciante de la Plaza, ya que era de la familia, pero su timidez se lo impidió. Al poco rato, Daniel Povey y Dick se dirigieron con la máquina al extremo de la Plaza, se detuvieron frente a la tienda de Holl, y Dick, bien instalado en el sillín, intentó bajar las suaves pendientes adoquinadas de la Plaza. Fracasó una y otra vez; la máquina tenía la sorprendente manía de darse la vuelta, deslizarse cuesta arriba y luego tumbarse tranquilamente de costado. En aquel pasaje de la biografía de Dick todas las puertas de las tiendas estaban llenas de gente. Por fin el velocípedo se mostró más dispuesto a obedecer y hete aquí que en un momento iba Dick plaza abajo y los espectadores contuvieron el aliento como si fuera Blondin cruzando el Niágara. Parecía que fuera a caerse en cualquier momento, pero se las arregló para mantenerse derecho. Ya había recorrido veinte yardas..., ¡treinta yardas! ¡Era un milagro lo que estaba haciendo! La carrera continuó; parecía durar horas. Y entonces brotó en el seno de los espectadores la débil esperanza de que el prodigio llegase a lo más bajo de la Plaza. Iba cada vez más deprisa con su artilugio. Pero la Plaza era enorme, interminable. Samuel Povey miraba fijamente al fenómeno, que se iba acercando, como un pájaro a una serpiente, con los ojos saliéndose de las órbitas. La velocidad del pequeño se hacía cada vez mayor y su camino cada vez más estrecho. ¡Sí; llegaría, lo lograría! Samuel Povey, en su tensión nerviosa, levantó involuntariamente la pierna. Ahora su esperanza de que llegara se convirtió en temor, ya que la carrera se aceleraba más y más. Todo el mundo levantó una pierna y abrió la boca. Y el intrépido niño llegó y, finalmente victorioso, se estrelló en la acera delante de Samuel a una velocidad lo menos de seis millas por hora.

Samuel lo ayudó a ponerse en pie, ileso. Y de alguna manera aquel acto de ayudar a Dick a ponerse en pie revistió de importancia a Samuel, le dio parte en la gloria de la hazaña.

Acudió corriendo Daniel Povey, muy alegre.

—¿No está mal para empezar, eh? —exclamó el gran Daniel. Aunque no era en modo alguno un hombre cándido, lo orgulloso que estaba de su vástago le hacía ser un poco ingenuo.

Padre e hijo explicaron a Samuel cómo funcionaba la máquina; Dick repetía sin cesar la verdad, tan extraña, de que si uno nota que se está cayendo a la derecha tiene que girar a la derecha y viceversa. Samuel se vio repentinamente admitido, por así decirlo, a la hermandad privada del velocípedo y elevado por encima del resto de la Plaza. En otra aventura sucedieron acontecimientos aún más emocionantes. El rubio Dick era uno de esos locuelos peligrosos y frenéticos que nacen sin sentido del miedo. El secreto de la máquina se le había revelado en su reciente carrera y estaba calladamente decidido a superarse a sí mismo. En precario equilibrio volvió a bajar la Plaza con el ceño fruncido y los dientes apretados, y consiguió doblar la esquina de King Street. Constanza, que estaba en la sala, vio una incomprensible cosa con alas que pasaba volando por delante de la ventana. Los gritos de los primos Povey expresaron alarma y protesta; ambos echaron a correr en

su seguimiento, pues la pendiente de King Street es abrupta en el estricto sentido de la palabra. A mitad de la calle había alcanzado una velocidad de veinte millas por hora y se encaminaba directamente hacia la iglesia, como si se hubiera propuesto derribarla y perecer. La puerta principal del cementerio estaba abierta; el terrible chiquillo, con la suerte de los lunáticos, cruzó los pórticos como una exhalación y entró indemne en el terreno sagrado. Los primos Povey lo descubrieron tendido en una tumba herbosa, rebosante de orgullo. Sus primeras palabras fueron:

—Papá ¿has recogido mi gorra?

El simbolismo del asombroso viaje no escapó a la Plaza; incluso se habló mucho de él.

Aquel incidente condujo a que los dos primos entablasen amistad. Adquirieron la costumbre de reunirse en la Plaza para charlar. Aquellos encuentros fueron muy comentados, pues las relaciones de Samuel con Daniel, mayor que él, habían sido siempre muy distantes. Todos tenían entendido que a Samuel le desagradaba la esposa de Daniel Povey todavía más que a la mayoría de la gente. La mujer de Daniel, sin embargo, no estaba en la ciudad; de no haber sido así probablemente Samuel no habría llegado al extremo de reunirse con Daniel ni siquiera en el terreno neutral de la Plaza. Pero una vez roto el hielo Samuel se alegraba de tener una relación de creciente intimidad con su primo. Aquella amistad era halagadora para él, pues Daniel, a pesar de su mujer, era un personaje en un mundo más amplio que el de Samuel; además consagraba su posición de igualdad con cualquier comerciante (aunque había sido aprendiz) y apreciaba y admiraba sinceramente a Daniel, para su propia sorpresa.

Daniel Povey agradaba a todo el mundo; era un favorito en todas las categorías. Primer repostero, miembro de la junta local y ayudante del coadjutor de San Lucas, tenía y había tenido durante veinticinco años un papel muy destacado en la ciudad. Era un hombre alto y apuesto, de barba recortada y grisácea, sonrisa jovial y oscuros ojos centelleantes. Su buen humor era al parecer permanente. Poseía dignidad sin la menor rigidez; era bien recibido por sus iguales y sinceramente adorado por sus inferiores. Tendría que ser jefe de alguaciles, pues era lo bastante rico, pero se interpuso un misterioso obstáculo entre Daniel Povey y aquel supremo honor, un impedimento apenas tangible que no se podía establecer con claridad. Era un hombre capaz, honrado, ingenioso, próspero y un excelente orador, y, si no pertenecía al sector más austero de la sociedad, sí, por ejemplo, se dejaba caer como si tal cosa por el «Tigre» a tomar una cerveza, o profería algún juramento, o contaba un chiste guasón..., bueno, en una ciudad de treinta mil habitantes y mentalidad abierta esas proclividades no impiden en absoluto que una persona goce de gran estima. Pero, ¿cómo se podría expresar sin hacer injusticia a Daniel Povey? Era un hombre de moral intachable; sus opiniones eran inocuas. La verdad es que, para las clases dominantes de Bursley, Daniel Povey rendía culto al dios Pan con un poquitín de fanatismo. Era uno de los vestigios que mantenían viva la gran tradición de Pan desde los tiempos de la Regencia y durante la vasta y árida época victoriana. El carácter frívolo de su esposa era considerado por muchos como un castigo de Dios por la robusta naturaleza rabelesiana de su conversación más privada, por su franco interés y su eterna preocupación por aspectos de la vida y de la actividad humana que, aunque esenciales para el propósito divino, no eran palmariamente reconocidos como tales... ni siquiera por los Danieles Poveys. No se trataba de su conducta, sino de su mentalidad. Si no explicaba su amistad con el rector de San Lucas, sí explicaba su alejamiento del vínculo metodista primitivo, al cual había pertenecido la familia Povey desde la creación del metodismo primitivo en Turnhill en 1807.

Daniel Povey tenía la costumbre de dar por sentado que todo varón rebosaba de interés por el sagrado culto de Pan. Esta idea, aunque en ocasiones causaba inconvenientes en un principio, acababa venciendo merced a la verdad que contenía. Así ocurrió con Samuel. Éste no había sospechado que Pan tuviera cordones de seda con los que atraerlo. Siempre había apartado los ojos de este dios, es decir, dentro de lo razonable. No obstante, ahora, Daniel, quizá un par de mañanas de buen tiempo a la semana, en medio de la Plaza, con *Fan* sentada detrás en las frías piedras y el señor Critchlow con expresión irónica a la puerta de su farmacia, ataviado con su largo delantal blanco, distraía a Samuel durante media hora contándole las tradiciones más íntimas de Pan, y Samuel ni se inmutaba. Por el contrario, resistía el tirón y fingía con todas sus fuerzas ser en potencia un perfecto archisacerdote del dios. Daniel le enseñaba mucho; volvía ante él la página de la vida, por así decirlo, y, mostrándole el reverso, le decía: «Mira todo lo que te estabas perdiendo». Samuel levantaba la vista hacia la larga y noble nariz y los gruesos labios de su primo, de más edad y tan experimentado, tan agradable, tan famoso, tan estimado, tan filosófico, y admitía para su capote que había llegado a los cuarenta años hecho un bobo. Y luego volvía a bajarla a la ligera mancha de harina de la pierna derecha de Daniel y pensaba que la vida es y tiene que ser eso, la vida.

Una tarde, no muchas semanas después de su iniciación en el culto, le sobresaltó el rostro preocupado de Constanza. Ahora bien, un marido a quien tras seis años de matrimonio no le ha acontecido ser padre no se sobresalta fácilmente por una expresión como la de Constanza. Años antes sí se sobresaltaba con frecuencia y pasaba unos días en suspenso. Pero ya hacía mucho que se había tornado inmune a aquellas alarmas. Y ahora se había vuelto a sobresaltar, pero como se puede sobresaltar un hombre que no se sorprende lo más mínimo

porque lo sobresalten. Y pasaron siete días interminables, y Samuel y Constanza se miraban como un par de culpables cuyo secreto se niega a ser guardado. Pasaron tres días más, y luego otros tres. Entonces observó Samuel en tono firme, masculino, afrontando los hechos:

—¡Oh, no hay duda!

Y se miraron como conspiradores que hubiesen encendido una mecha y no pudieran refugiarse en la huida. Sus ojos no paraban de decir, con una deliciosa y encantadora mezcla de ingenua modestia y terrible alegría:

—¡Bueno, pues lo hemos conseguido!

¡Y allí estaba, el futuro increíble, incomprensible, ante ellos! Samuel nunca se imaginó cómo iba a acabar anunciándose. Se había imaginado, en su ingenuidad primera, que un día Constanza, ruborizándose, acercaría los labios a su oído para susurrarle... algo positivo. Algo así no se le había ocurrido en su vida. Pero las cosas son obstinada e incurablemente poco sentimentales.

—Creo que tendríamos que ir el domingo a decírselo a mamá —dijo Constanza.

El impulso de él fue replicar a su manera grandiosa y brusca: «Oh, será suficiente con escribir». Pero se contuvo y dijo, con esmerada deferencia:

—¿Crees que será mejor que escribir?

Todo había cambiado. Preparó todo su ser para hacer frente al destino y para ayudar a Constanza a hacerle frente.

El domingo salió mal día. Fue a Axe sin Constanza. Lo llevó su primo en una carretela y él dijo que volvería andando, ya que el ejercicio le sentaba bien. Durante el viaje, Daniel, a quien no había dicho nada, iba charlando como de costumbre, y Samuel fingió escuchar con la actitud de costumbre, pero secretamente despreciaba a Daniel por ser un hombre que tenía en la cabeza algo que no era de suprema importancia. Su punto de vista era más auténtico que el de Daniel.

Volvió a casa andando, como había decidido, por el ondulado páramo que sueña en el corazón de Inglaterra. Se le hizo de noche por el camino y estaba cansado. Pero la tierra, mientras giraba por el desnudo espacio, hizo girar también la luna ante sus ojos, y él apresuró el paso. Un viento de Arabia le refrescó el rostro. Y por fin, desde la cima de Toft End, vio de repente las Cinco Ciudades titilando en sus pequeñas colinas, en el amplio anfiteatro. Y una de aquellas lámparas era la de Constanza; una de ellas, en alguna parte. Estaba vivo, pues. Se adentró en la sombra de la naturaleza. Los misterios lo volvieron solemne. ¡Caramba! ¡Un velocípedo, su primo, y ahora aquello!

«¡Vaya! ¡Con mil demonios! ¡Con mil demonios!», no paraba de repetir, él que jamás soltaba un juramento.

Capitulo III

CYRIL

I

Constanza estaba junto a la gran ventana de numerosos cristales de la sala. Había engordado. Aunque siempre había sido rellenita, su figura era linda y tenía la cintura bien marcada. Pero ahora había perdido aquella figura; la cintura ya no existía y ya no había miriñaque para crearla artificialmente. Un observador que no se hallara bajo el encanto de su rostro estaría quizá justificado si dijera que estaba gorda y abultada. Su rostro, grave, amable y expectante, con aquellas radiantes y frescas mejillas y la redondeada suavidad de sus curvas, compensaba por la figura. Tenía casi veintinueve años.

Eran los últimos días de octubre. En Wedgwood Street, cerca de Boulton Terrace, todas las casitas marrones habían sido demolidas a fin de dejar sitio para un grandioso mercado cubierto, cuyos cimientos se estaban excavando. Aquella destrucción dejaba ver un extenso trozo de cielo al noroeste. Una gran nube gris de borde irregular se elevaba desde las profundidades y tapaba el suave azul del cercano crepúsculo; mientras tanto, al oeste, detrás *de* Constanza, el sol se ocultaba con serena y esplendorosa melancolía en el silencio de jueves de la villa. Era una de aquellas tardes que reunían toda la tristeza de la tierra y la transformaban en belleza.

Samuel Povey volvió la esquina de Wedgwood Street y cruzó King Street en oblicuo a la puerta principal, que abrió Constanza.

—¿Y bien? —inquirió ésta.

—No está mejor. Hay que reconocerlo, está peor. Tendría que haberme quedado, pero sabía que estarías preocupada. Así que cogí el de las tres y cuatro.

—¿Qué tal es esa señora Gildchrist como enfermera?

—Muy buena —dijo Samuel con convicción—, ¡Muy buena!

—¡Qué bendición! Me imagino que no verías al médico, por casualidad.

—Sí que lo vi.

—¿Qué te dijo?

Samuel hizo un gesto despectivo:

—No dijo nada en particular. Con la hidropesía, en esa fase, ya sabes...

Constanza había vuelto junto a la ventana; su ansiedad no se había atenuado, al parecer.

—No me gusta el cariz de esa nube —murmuró.

—¡Cómo! ¿Todavía están fuera? —preguntó Samuel, quitándose el abrigo.

—¡Ahí están! —exclamó Constanza. Sus rasgos se transfiguraron repentinamente, corrió a la puerta, la abrió y bajó la escalera.

Por la pendiente subía un cochecito de niño empujado por una muchacha sin aliento.

—Amy —protestó Constanza con suavidad—, le dije que no fuera lejos.

—He venido todo lo deprisa que he podido, señora, en cuanto vi esa nube —dijo resoplando la chica, con aspecto de estar profundamente agradecida por haber escapado a un gran desastre.

Constanza metió las manos en los rincones del cochecito y sacó del capullo al centro del universo, lo

examinó con callada pasión y luego se lo llevó corriendo al interior de la casa, aunque aún no había caído una gota de lluvia.

—¡Precioso! —profirió Amy en éxtasis, siguiéndolo con sus juveniles ojos virginales hasta que desapareció. Después se llevó el cochecito, que ya no tenía más valor ni interés que una cáscara de huevo. Hubo que dar la vuelta para llevarlo a la entrada del patio de Brougham Street, más allá de la fachada de la tienda, que estaba cerrada.

Constanza se sentó en el sofá de crin y abrazó y besó a su tesoro antes de quitarle el gorrito.

—¡Aquí está papá! —le dijo, como si le comunicara una noticia extraña y embelesada—. ¡Aquí está papá, que viene de colgar el abrigo en el pasillo! ¡Papá, frotándose las manos! —y después, con una rápida transición en voz y expresión—: ¡Míralo, Sam!

Samuel, absorto, se inclinó hacia delante.

—¡Ah, pícamelo! ¡Ah, pícamelo! —saludó al bebé, levantando el dedo ante la nariz de éste.

El bebé, que hasta entonces había mantenido una pasiva indiferencia ante los fenómenos exteriores, levantó los codos y los dedos de los pies, de su diminuta boca salieron unas pompas y miró fijamente el dedo con la sonrisa más pillina y cautivadora, como si dijera: «Conozco ese gran dedo, es una broma que no ve nadie más que yo y que es mi secreta alegría, que nunca compartiréis».

—¿Está preparado el té? —preguntó Samuel, recuperando su gravedad y su actitud habitual.

—Tienes que dar tiempo a la chica para que saque las cosas —respondió Constanza—. Vamos a apartar la mesa del fuego; el bebé puede estar en la alfombrilla de la chimenea, envuelto en las mantillas, mientras tomamos el té. —Luego se dirigió a la criatura con embeleso—: Y jugar con sus juguetes, ¡todos sus juguetes, tan bonitos!

—Sabes que la señorita Insull se queda a tomar el té, ¿no?

Constanza, con la cabeza inclinada sobre el bebé, que formaba una mancha blanca sobre su cómodo vestido marrón, hizo un gesto de asentimiento sin hablar.

Samuel Povey, paseándose arriba y abajo por la habitación, empezó a darle detalles sobre su precipitado viaje a Axe. La anciana señora Baines, habiendo visto a su nieto, se preparaba para abandonar este mundo. Nunca más volvería a exclamar, con su brusco tono cordialmente despiadado, «¡bobadas!». La situación era muy difícil y angustiosa, pues Constanza no podía dejar al niño, ni quería correr el riesgo de llevarlo consigo a Axe hasta que las cosas llegaran al límite. Lo estaba destetando. En cualquier caso, Constanza no podría hacerse cargo de cuidar a su madre. Fue preciso buscar una enfermera. El señor Povey había descubierto una en la persona de la señora Gilchrist, la segunda esposa de un granjero de Malpas, Cheshire; la primera era hermana del difunto John Baines. El señor Povey reconocía los méritos de la señora Gilchrist. La señora Baines estaba muy inquieta por Sofía, que llevaba mucho tiempo sin dar señales de vida. El señor Povey fue a Manchester y supo por los parientes de Scales que en efecto no se sabía nada de la pareja. No fue a Manchester de propio a este cometido. Más o menos una vez cada tres semanas, el martes, tenía que visitar los almacenes de Manchester. Pero el seguir la pista de los parientes de Scales le costó tanto tiempo y esfuerzo que, curiosamente, llegó a creer que había ido a la ciudad un martes con aquel objeto y no otro. Aunque estaba muy ocupado con la tienda, iba a Axe en un vuelo y volvía siempre que le era posible, descuidando sus asuntos. Se alegraba de hacer cuanto estuviera en su mano; aunque así no fuese, su conciencia sensible y tiránica le hubiera obligado a hacerlo. Pero, no obstante, se sentía virtuoso, y la preocupación, la fatiga y la falta de sueño intensificaban este sentimiento de virtud.

—De manera que si hay algún cambio repentino telegrafiarán —concluyó.

Constanza levantó la cabeza. Aquellas palabras, que confirmaban lo que las había motivado, la sacaron de su ensueño; por un momento vio a su madre agonizando.

—Pero ¿no querrás decir...? —empezó, tratando de ahuyentar la dolorosa visión por no justificarla los hechos.

—Querida mía —dijo Samuel, con todos los nervios de su cuerpo en tensión, los ojos ardiendo y un zumbido en la cabeza—, lo único que quiero decir es que si hay algún cambio repentino telegrafiarán.

Mientras tomaban el té, Samuel sentado frente a su mujer y la señorita Insull casi contra la pared (por

causa del traslado de la mesa), el bebé rodaba sobre la alfombrilla de la chimenea, cubierta con un chal de lana grande y mullido, originariamente propiedad de su abuela. Él no tenía preocupaciones ni responsabilidades. El chal era tan amplio que no distinguía con claridad los objetos que había más allá de sus confines. Encima había una pelota de goma, un muñeco de goma y un sonajero y también estaba *Fan.* El pequeñuelo recordaba vagamente las cuatro cosas y sus características. El fuego era también un viejo amigo. Alguna que otra vez había intentado tocarlo, pero siempre se interponía una reja alta y brillante. En diez meses no había dejado pasar un solo día sin hacer experimentos con aquel cambiante universo en el cual solamente él se mantenía firme y permanente. Los experimentos eran realizados principalmente por pura diversión, pero en lo referente a la comida se ponía serio. Recientemente, la conducta del universo en lo tocante a su comida le había desconcertado un tanto, incluso le había enojado. Sin embargo poseía un temperamento olvidadizo y alegre, y, mientras el universo siguiera cumpliendo su único objetivo como maquinaria para la satisfacción, en una u otra forma, de sus imperiosos deseos, no sentía inclinación a protestar. Contempló las llamas y se rió, y se rió porque se había reído. Lanzó lejos la pelota, culebreó tras ella y la atrapó con la seguridad que da la práctica. Trató de tragarse el muñeco; no fue hasta después de tratar de tragárselo varias veces cuando recordó el fracaso de intentos anteriores y desistió filosóficamente. Rodando, chocó violentamente, piernas y brazos en el aire, con el costado, que era como una montaña, de aquel mamut, *Fan,* y agarró la oreja de *Fan.* Toda la masa de *Fan* se levantó y desapareció de su vista; al instante se olvidó de *Fan.* Echó mano del muñeco e intentó tragárselo, y repitió la exhibición de sus habilidades con la pelota. Después vio de nuevo el fuego y se rió. Y así siguió existiendo durante siglos, sin responsabilidades ni ambiciones, y el chal era muy extenso. Por encima de su cabeza se desarrollaban operaciones tremendas. Se movían gigantes de un lado para otro. Se llevaban grandes vasijas y se traían grandes libros; profundas voces retumbaban regularmente en los espacios que se extendían más allá del chal. Pero él seguía ajeno a todo. Al final se dio cuenta de que una cara se inclinaba para mirarlo. La reconoció e inmediatamente se sintió perturbado por una sensación molesta en el estómago; la soportó durante cincuenta años más o menos, y luego profirió un gritito. La vida había recobrado su seriedad.

—Alpaca negra. Calidad B. Ancho 20, t.a. 22 yardas —leyó la señorita Insull en un gran libro. Ella y la señora Povey estaban comprobando las existencias.

Y el señor Povey respondió:

—Alpaca negra. Calidad B. Ancho 20, t.a. 22 yardas. Aún faltan diez minutos. —Había echado un vistazo al reloj.

El bebé no se figuraba que un alto dios invisible llamado Samuel Povey, a quien nada pasaba inadvertido y podía hacerlo todo al mismo tiempo, tenía dominio sobre su universo desde una distancia inconcebible. Por el contrario, la criatura clamaba para sí: «No hay Dios».

Su destete había llegado a la fase en la cual no sabe realmente qué es lo que va a ocurrir después. El enojo había comenzado tres meses justos después de su primer diente, lo cual es la norma de los dioses; cada vez había mayor motivo de perplejidad. No bien se había acostumbrado a un fenómeno, éste cesaba misteriosamente y era sustituido por otro que había olvidado por completo. Aquella tarde su madre le había dado el pecho, pero sólo después de tratar tontamente de distraerlo de los asuntos serios de la vida con baratijas de las que estaba harto. Sin embargo, cuando se vio ante su pletórico seno lo olvidó y perdonó todo. Él prefería aquel sencillo seno natural a las invenciones más modernas. Y no tenía vergüenza ni recato. Ni su madre tampoco. Era una juerga indecorosa a la cual tenían que asistir su padre y la señorita Insull. Su padre hubiera preferido que, puesto que la señorita Insull se había ofrecido amablemente a quedarse a trabajar en la tienda el jueves por la tarde y que en ésta hacía mucho frío, a las cinco y media se le diera el biberón y no el pecho. Era un progenitor muy tímido, casi como para andar pidiendo perdón al mundo, y proclive a mantenerse a distancia y hacer como si no tuviese nada que ver con el asunto; le desagradaba sinceramente que cualquiera presenciara la escena íntima de su esposa dando de mamar a su hijo. ¡Especialmente la señorita Insull, aquella solterona remilgada, atezada y bigotuda! No había llegado a definir como un ultraje a la señorita Insull el obligarla a presenciar dicha escena, pero en su pensamiento se acercaba a esa definición.

Constanza presentó el seno al niño a la manera inconsciente y primitiva de una joven madre; mientras el bebé mamaba, por la cabeza de Constanza pasaban fugazmente pensamientos acerca de su propia madre a modo de vagas formas que flotaban sobre el profundo mar de contento que anegaba su mente. Aquella enfermedad de su madre era anormal y el bebé era ahora, quizá por primera vez, enteramente normal en la conciencia de Constanza. Era algo que podía verse perturbado, no algo que perturbaba. ¡Qué cambio! ¡Qué cambio, que parecía imposible hasta que tuvo lugar!

Durante meses, antes del nacimiento, por la noche y en otras horas de silencio tenía vislumbres de la tremenda alteración que se avecinaba. No se había permitido ser tonta por anticipado; por temperamento era demasiado sagaz, demasiado equilibrada para ello; con todo, tuvo intermitentes momentos de terror en los

cuales el suelo parecía ceder bajo sus pies y su imaginación se estremecía ante lo que le esperaba. ¡Sólo momentos! Por lo general representaba la comedia del sensato sosiego casi a la perfección. El instante señalado se aproximaba. Y ella seguía sonriendo, y Samuel sonreía. Pero los preparativos, meticulosos, revolucionarios, desmentían sus sonrisas. La firme resolución de mantener a la señora Baines, por medios más o menos escrupulosos, alejada de Bursley hasta que todo hubiera terminado, desmentía sus sonrisas. ¡Y luego los primeros dolores, agudos, espeluznantes, crueles, precursores de la tortura! Pero cuando pasaron volvió a sonreír débilmente. Después estaba en la cama, con la sensación de que la casa estaba patas arriba, desorganizada sin remedio. Y entró el médico en la habitación. Ella sonrió al doctor como disculpándose, tontamente, como si dijera: «A todas nos llega. Aquí estoy». Estaba exteriormente tranquila. ¡Oh, sí, pero interiormente se sentía presa de un abyecto terror! «Estoy al borde del precipicio —era lo que pensaba—; dentro de un momento lo cruzaré». Y después los dolores: no los precursores sino el ejército de destrucción, interminable, que extendía el terror al pasar por ella rugiendo. Sin embargo pudo pensar, con gran claridad: «Ahora estoy en la mitad. Es esto; el horror que no me atrevía a contemplar. Mi vida está en la balanza. Parecía que nunca iba a llegar, que esto nunca me podría ocurrir a mí. ¡Pero al final ha llegado!».

¡Ah! Alguien le volvió a poner en la mano el extremo retorcido de una toalla —lo había soltado —y ella tiró y tiró, tanto como para haber roto un cable de acero. Y luego gritó. Fue de lástima. Fue para que alguien la ayudara, por lo menos que reparara en ella. Se estaba muriendo. Su alma la estaba abandonando. Y estaba sola, presa del pánico, en medio de un cataclismo que superaba mil veces todo el nauseabundo terror que había imaginado. «No puedo soportarlo», pensó con pasión. «¡Es imposible que me pidan que soporte esto!». Y luego lloró, vencida, aterrorizada, aplastada y desgarrada. ¡Se acabó el sentido común! ¡Se acabó la sabia calma! ¡Se acabó el respeto a sí misma! ¡Si ni siquiera era ya una mujer! ¡No era nada más que una especie de víctima animalizada! Y después el espasmo supremo e interminable, durante el cual entregó el alma y se despidió de su propio ser...

Yacía muy cómoda en el blando lecho; ociosa, atontada; la felicidad formaba una especie de delgada costra sobre la lava de su angustia y de su miedo. Y a su lado estaba el alma que había luchado por salir de ella, implacablemente; el secreto perturbador revelado a la luz de la mañana. ¡Era curioso verlo! ¡No era como los bebés que había visto, rojos, arrugados, animalescos! Pero —por alguna razón que no se puso a analizar — lo estrechó con inmensa ternura.

Sam estaba junto a la cama, lejos de su vista. Estaba tan cómoda y tan atontada que no pudo mover la cabeza, ni siquiera pedirle que se pusiera donde pudiera verlo. Hubo de esperar a que él se acercase.

Por la tarde volvió el médico y la sorprendió diciendo que el suyo había sido un parto ideal. Se sentía demasiado exhausta para reprender al cruel, ciego e insensible viejo. Pero sabía lo que sabía. «¡Nadie imaginará jamás —pensó—, nadie podrá jamás imaginar por lo que he pasado! Decid lo que queráis. Yo sí lo *sé* ahora».

Poco a poco fue recuperando el conocimiento de su entorno hogareño, comprendiendo que estaba desmoralizado de arriba a abajo y que cuando llegara el momento de ponerse manos a la obra no sabría por dónde empezar, aun suponiendo que el bebé no monopolizara su atención. La tarea le pareció abrumadora. Después quiso levantarse. Después se levantó. ¡Qué golpe para su seguridad en sí misma! Volvió a la cama como un conejito asustado a su agujero, muy contenta de verse de nuevo sobre las blandas almohadas. Se dijo: «Sin embargo tendrá que llegar el momento en que esté abajo yendo de un lado a otro, viendo gente, cocinando y supervisando la sombrerería». Bien, pues llegó —con la salvedad de que tuvo que ceder la sombrerería a la señorita Insull—, pero ya no fue igual. ¡No; todo había cambiado! El bebé lo ponía todo en otro plano. Era un increíble intruso; a Constanza no le quedó libre ni un minuto de su vida cotidiana; él no hacía la mínima concesión. Si Constanza apartaba la mirada de él podía estallar en la eternidad y abandonarla.

Y ahora estaba dándole de mamar tranquila y sensatamente en presencia de la señorita Insull. Estaba acostumbrada a la importancia de la criatura, a la fragilidad de su organismo, a despertarse dos veces por la noche, a estar gorda. Ya había recobrado sus fuerzas. La agitación convulsiva que había perturbado su reposo durante seis meses había desaparecido por completo. Su nuevo estado, ser madre, era normal, y el bebé era tan normal que ella no podía concebir la casa sin él.

¡Y todo en diez meses!

Cuando el bebé quedó instalado en su cuna para la noche Constanza bajó y encontró a la señorita Insull y a Samuel todavía trabajando y más que nunca, pero ahora haciendo sumas. Se sentó, dejando abierta la puerta del arranque de la escalera. Llevaba una labor de bordado, un gorrito. Y mientras la señorita Insull y Samuel combinaban libras, chelines y peniques, cuchicheando a gran velocidad, ella se inclinó sobre aquel delicado, íntimo y costoso trabajo, dirigiendo la aguja con pausada exactitud. Entonces levantó la cabeza y

aguzó el oído.

—Disculpe —dijo la señorita Insull—; creo que oigo llorar al niño.

—Y dos, ocho, y tres, once. Es inevitable que llore —dijo rápidamente el señor Povey, sin levantar la cabeza.

Los padres del bebé no acostumbraban a discutir su vida doméstica ni siquiera con la señorita Insull, pero Constanza tenía que justificarse como madre.

—Lo he dejado bien cómodo —dijo Constanza— Llora sólo porque se cree que no le hacemos caso. Nosotros creemos que nunca es pronto para empezar a aprender.

—¡Qué razón tiene! —exclamó la señorita Insull—. Dos, y me llevo tres.

Aquel llanto lejano, débil, quejumbroso y lastimero continuaba obstinadamente. Continuó por espacio de treinta minutos. Constanza no pudo seguir con su labor. Aquel llanto desintegraba su voluntad, disolvía su dura sagacidad.

Sin decir palabra se escurrió escaleras arriba tras dejar el gorrito en su mecedora con cuidado.

El señor Povey vaciló un instante y luego salió tras ella dando un salto que sobresaltó a *Fan.* Cerró la puerta, dejando a la señorita Insull en la habitación, pero fue demasiado rápida para él. Vio a Constanza con la mano en la puerta del dormitorio.

—Querida —protestó conteniéndose—, ¿y ahora qué vas a hacer?

—Sólo estaba escuchando —dijo Constanza.

—Sé razonable y ven abajo.

Hablaba en voz baja, ocultando apenas su nerviosa irritación; se acercó a ella de puntillas por el pasillo y subió los dos peldaños que había más allá del quemador de gas. Le siguió *Fan,* meneando la cola con expectación.

—¿Y si no está bien? —sugirió Constanza.

—¡Psché! —exclamó despectivamente el señor Povey—. ¡Acuérdate de lo que ocurrió anoche y de lo que dijiste!

Discutieron, sofocando la voz para aparentar buena voluntad, en el recogimiento del pasillo. *Fan,* decepcionada, dejó de menear la cola y se fue trotando. El llanto del bebé, detrás de la puerta, se elevó hasta convertirse en un aullido desesperado que ejerció tal efecto en el corazón de Constanza que habría pasado a través del fuego para llegar a su hijo. Pero el señor Povey la retuvo. Ella se rebeló, enfadada, herida, resentida. El sentido común, el ideal de tolerancia mutua, se habían esfumado de aquella excitada pareja. Sin duda habría terminado en pelea, con Samuel mirándola furibundo desde el otro lado de un abismo sin fondo, si la señorita Insull, para gran sorpresa de ambos, no hubiera subido precipitadamente la escalera.

El señor Povey se volvió hacia ella, tragándose la emoción.

—¡Un telegrama! —dijo la señorita Insull— Lo ha traído el jefe de la oficina de correos en persona...

—¿Cómo? ¿El señor Derry? —preguntó Samuel, abriendo el telegrama con fingida majestuosidad.

—Sí. Dijo que era muy tarde para la entrega habitual. Pero como parecía muy importante...

Samuel lo recorrió con la mirada e inclinó la cabeza con gesto grave; después lo pasó a su mujer, cuyos ojos se llenaron de lágrimas.

—Le diré al primo Daniel que me lleve ahora mismo —dijo Samuel, dueño de sí mismo y de la situación.

—¿No sería mejor que alquilaras un carruaje? —sugirió Constanza. Tenía prejuicios contra Daniel.

El señor Povey sacudió la cabeza.

—Él se ofreció —replicó—. No puedo decirle que no.

—Ponte el abrigo grueso, querido —dijo Constanza como soñando mientras bajaba con él.

—Espero que no sea... —terció la señorita Insull.

—Sí que es, señorita Insull —dijo Samuel.

En menos de un minuto se había marchado.

Constanza corrió escaleras arriba. Pero el llanto había cesado. Giró el picaporte lenta y cautelosamente y entró sin hacer ruido en la habitación. Una lamparilla de noche proyectaba largas sombras entre los macizos muebles de caoba y el reps carmesí adornado con borlas de las cortinas. Y entre la cama y el diván (en el que estaba la Biblia familiar de Samuel, comprada recientemente) se veía la cuna entre las sombras. Constanza cogió la lamparilla y dio la vuelta a la cama sigilosamente. Sí, había decidido quedarse dormido. El lejano peligro de muerte había derrotado su diabólica obstinación. El sino lo había vencido. ¡Cuán maravillosamente suave y delicada era aquella mejilla húmeda de lágrimas! ¡Cuán frágil aquella diminuta mano apretada! En Constanza, el pesar y la alegría se unieron místicamente.

II

El salón estaba lleno de visitantes en traje de ceremonia. Era el antiguo salón, pero recientemente revestido con los espléndidos muebles Victorianos de la casa de la difunta tía Harriet en Axe: dos revisteros, una gran librería, una espléndida mesa rutilante que no había quien levantara, sillas y sillones intrincadamente torturados. Los muebles que había en el salón estaban ahora abajo, en la sala, dándole grandiosidad. Toda la casa respiraba opulencia; estaba atiborrada de un lujo callado y comedido; los objetos menos importantes, que ocupaban los rincones más modestos, eran lo que la señora Baines habría llamado «buenos». Constanza y Samuel habían recibido la mitad del dinero de la tía Harriet y la mitad del de la señora Baines; la otra mitad se acumulaba para una hipotética Sofía con el señor Critchlow como fideicomisario. El negocio seguía prosperando. La gente sabía que Samuel Povey estaba comprando casas. Sin embargo, Samuel y Constanza no habían hecho amistades; no se habían, como se decía en las Cinco Ciudades, «establecido relaciones sociales externas», si bien habían establecido relaciones en listas externas de suscripción. Se reservaban para sí mismos (haciendo hincapié en la expresión). Aquellos invitados no eran sus invitados, sino los de Cyril.

Le habían puesto el nombre de Samuel porque Constanza quería que se llamara como su padre, y Cyril porque su padre despreciaba secretamente el nombre de Samuel; lo llamaban Cyril: «señor Cyril» lo llamaba Amy, definitiva sucesora de Maggie. Los pensamientos de su madre estaban fijos en él desde que se despertaba. Su padre, cuando no estaba haciendo planes para el bienestar de Cyril, estaba ganando un dinero cuyo único objetivo no podía ser otro que el bienestar de Cyril. La casa giraba en tomo a Cyril; todo deseo tenía su fin de una u otra forma en él. La tienda existía ahora únicamente por él. Y las casas que Samuel compraba por contrato privado o con aire abochornado en subastas tenían como fin de una u otra forma a Cyril. Samuel y Constanza habían dejado de ser unos seres que tenían en sí mismos su justificación; nunca pensaban en sí mismos salvo como los padres de Cyril.

No eran en modo alguno plenamente conscientes de esto. Si se les hubiese acusado de monomanía habrían mostrado la sonrisa de quienes están seguros de su sentido común y de su equilibrio mental. No obstante, padecían de monomanía. Instintivamente ocultaban el hecho cuanto les era posible. Nunca lo admitían, ni siquiera ante sí mismos. Samuel llegaba incluso a decir: «Este niño no es el mundo entero. Hay que mantenerlo en su lugar». Constanza estaba siempre enseñándole a tener consideración con su padre por ser la persona más importante de la familia. Samuel estaba siempre enseñándole a tener consideración con su madre por ser la persona más importante de la familia. No se ahorró esfuerzo por convencerlo de que era un cero a la izquierda, una persona insignificante, que debiera estar muy contento de vivir. Pero él conocía toda su importancia. Sabía que toda la ciudad era suya. Sabía que sus padres se engañaban. Incluso cuando lo castigaban sabía que era por ser tan importante. Nunca comunicó ni un adarme de este conocimiento a sus padres; una sabiduría primitiva le indujo a guardarlo celosamente en su seno.

Tenía cuatro años y medio, era moreno como su padre y guapo como su tía y estaba alto para su edad; ninguno de sus rasgos se parecía a los de su madre, pero en ocasiones «se le daba un aire». Desde la caprichosa producción de sonidos inarticulados y, después, de algunos monosílabos inarticulados que describían cosas concretas y deseos evidentes, había llegado poco a poco a adquirir un asombroso dominio idiomático de la

más difícil de las lenguas teutonas; no había nada que no supiera decir. Sabía andar y correr, estaba imbuido de un conocimiento exacto de Dios y no abrigaba ninguna duda en cuanto a la especial debilidad que tenía por él una deidad menor llamada Jesús.

Ahora bien, aquella fiesta había sido inventada y planificada por su madre. Su padre, después de burlarse de la idea, había dicho que si había que hacerla, había que hacerla bien, y puso en el empeño toda su capacidad organizativa. Cyril, en principio, la había aceptado, nada más que aceptado, pero conforme se aproximaba el día y aumentaba la magnitud de los preparativos, había llegado a verla con fervor y luego con entusiasmo. Cuando su padre lo llevó a la confitería de Daniel Povey, enfrente, a elegir pasteles, había dejado ver, con sus solemnes y exigentes titubeos, con cuánta seriedad consideraba el asunto.

Como es natural, tenía que celebrarse un jueves por la tarde. Era verano, la estación adecuada para los atavíos pálidos y frágiles.

Y los ocho niños que se sentaron en tomo a la gran mesa de la tía Harriet resplandecían como el sol. Ni siquiera las servilletas especialmente elegidas por Constanza pudieron ocultar aquella riqueza y profusión de encaje blanco y bordados. Nunca en su vida vuelven a verse los amables niños de las Cinco Ciudades vestidos con tanta riqueza como entre los cuatro y los cinco años. Semanas de trabajo, miles de pies cúbicos de gas, noches enteras robadas al descanso, a la vista y a la salud en general desaparecen en la manufactura de un solo traje que la mermelada puede estropear accidentalmente en diez segundos. Así era en aquella época y así es hoy. Los invitados de Cyril tenían entre cuatro y seis años; casi todos eran mayores que su anfitrión; esto era una lástima, pues disminuía su importancia, pero hasta los cuatro años de edad el sentido de lo adecuado, incluso del decoro corriente, que tiene un niño es demasiado poco fiable para una fiesta respetable.

Por los alrededores de la mesa se hallaban los adultos, damas en su mayoría; también habían echado el resto, pues tenían que competir entre sí. Constanza exhibía un vestido nuevo de seda carmesí; después del luto por su madre había abandonado definitivamente el negro, que por razón de sus obligaciones en la tienda había llevado desde los dieciséis años hasta pocos meses antes del nacimiento de Cyril. Ya nunca iba a la tienda como no fuera casualmente, en breves visitas de inspección. Seguía estando gruesa; el destructor de su figura estaba sentado en la cabecera de la mesa. Samuel estaba junto a ella; era el único varón hasta que llegó el señor Critchlow, para sorpresa de todos; había una sobrina nieta suya en el grupo. Samuel, si bien no llevaba su mejor traje, tampoco iba de diario. Con su gran pechera de volantes, su pequeña corbata negra y su rostro moreno y su barbita negra coronándolo todo, parecía muy nervioso y tímido. No tenía costumbre de recibir. Constanza tampoco, pero su benevolencia, que siempre rebosaba saliendo a la tranquila superficie de su personalidad, hacía imposible en ella la timidez. La señorita Insull se hallaba también presente, con su traje negro de la tienda, «para ayudar». Finalmente estaba Amy, que conforme pasaban los años iba asumiendo el carácter de una fiel criada aunque sólo tenía veintitrés años. ¡Una muchacha fea, brusca, descarada, con ideas apropiadas respecto al placer! Pues se levantaba temprano y se retiraba tarde a fin de sacar una hora para salir con el señor Cyril, y el que se le permitiera acostar al señor Cyril era verdaderamente su mayor dicha.

Todos aquellos adultos estaban continuamente metiendo brazos en el esponjoso friso de niños que circundaba la colmada mesa: sacaban peligrosas cucharas de las tazas y las ponían en los platos, cambiaban los platos, pasaban pasteles, extendían la mermelada, susurraban palabras de consuelo, explicaciones y sabios consejos. El señor Critchlow, de cabello blanco como la nieve pero aún derecho, observó que había allí «la mar de cotorreo». Aunque la ventana estaba un poco abierta, el aire estaba cargado del olor humano natural que emana de los niños pequeños. Más de una madre, metiendo la nariz en una masa de encaje, aspiró aquel grato perfume con un estremecimiento voluptuoso.

Cyril, al tiempo que satisfacía sin cesar sus exigencias físicas, estaba de un talante que se aproximaba al ideal. Orgulloso y radiante, combinaba la urbanidad con una cierta condescendencia elegante. Sus brillantes ojos y su manera de extender la mermelada con una cuchara decían: «Soy el rey de esta fiesta. Esta fiesta se celebra solamente en mi honor. Yo lo sé. Todos lo sabemos. Sin embargo, hago como si fuéramos iguales, vosotros y yo». Hablaba de sus libros ilustrados con la jovencita que estaba a su derecha, llamada Jennie, de cuatro años, pálida y linda, sobrina nieta del señor Critchlow y sin duda la reina de la fiesta. El atractivo del muchacho era indiscutible; sabía adoptar un aire aristocrático. ¡Era un espectáculo delicioso verlos a los dos, Cyril y Jennie, tan suaves y delicados, tan infantiles en sus pilas de cojines y libros, con sus calcetines blancos y sus zapatos negros colgando tan lejos de la alfombra, y sin embargo tan mayores, tan comedidos! Y no eran más que una representación de toda la mesa. Toda la mesa estaba bañada en el encanto y el misterio de los primeros años, de la fragilidad indefensa, de los instintos que no se avergüenzan de sí mismos, de las almas que se despiertan. Constanza y Samuel estaban muy satisfechos; llenaban de elogios a los hijos de los demás, pero con la reserva de que, por supuesto, Cyril era *hors concours*[35]. Los dos creían verdaderamente en aquel momento que Cyril era, de alguna manera sutil que ambos percibían pero no podían definir, superior a todos los otros niños.

Alguien, una parienta oficiosa de un visitante, empezó a pasar cierto pastel que tenía paredes de color marrón, tejado con baño de coco y cuerpo amarillo tachonado de glóbulos de color carmesí. No era un pastel fabulosamente llamativo, no era un pastel al que un niño de gustos amplios pudiera dar gran importancia; era un buen pastel de tipo medio. ¿Quién habría sospechado que figuraba en la estimación de Cyril como el rey de los pasteles? Había insistido a su padre para que lo comprara en la confitería del primo Daniel, y quizá Samuel debiera haber adivinado que aquel pastel era para Cyril el fulgor que un espíritu ardiente seguiría a través del desierto. Samuel, sin embargo, no era un observador atento y adolecía gravemente de falta de imaginación. Constanza sabía únicamente que Cyril había mencionado el pastel una o dos veces. No fue por azares del destino por lo que el pastel halló gran favor; a su popularidad contribuyó la atolondrada pariente oficiosa, que, sin imaginarse el volcán que estaba a punto de desencadenar, encarecía sus méritos con necio entusiasmo. Un niño cogió dos trozos, uno con cada mano; dio la casualidad de que era el visitante del cual era pariente la distribuidora del pastel, y ésta protestó, expresando lo escandalizada que estaba. Al momento Constanza y Samuel acudieron allí y juraron con una sonrisa angelical que era perfectamente correcto el que aquel encantador muchachito cogiera dos trozos del pastel. Fue aquel barullo el que llamó la atención de Cyril a la evanescencia del rey de los pasteles. Su expresión cambió al instante de un sereno orgullo a una terrible ansiedad. Los ojos se le salían de las órbitas. Su diminuta boca creció y creció, como una boca que formara parte de una pesadilla. Ya no era humano; era un tigre devorador de pasteles al que se le arrebata la presa. Nadie reparó en él. La tonta oficiosa convenció a Jennie de que cogiera el último trozo del pastel, que era bastante pequeño.

Entonces todos repararon al mismo tiempo en Cyril, pues profirió un chillido. No era el grito de un alma desesperada que ve su bello sueño iridiscente hecho pedazos a sus pies; fue el grito de un espíritu fuerte y dominante montando en cólera. Se volvió a Jennie, sollozando, y le quitó el pastel. Jennie, que no estaba acostumbrada a semejante conducta en los anfitriones y además era una altiva belleza del futuro, de las que ponen a todo el mundo en su sitio, defendió su pastel. Al fin y al cabo no era ella la que había cogido dos trozos a la vez. Cyril le pegó en el ojo y luego se embutió la mayor parte del trozo de pastel en la enorme boca. No podía tragarlo, ni siquiera masticarlo, pues tenía la garganta rígida y agarrotada. Así que el pastel sobresalía de sus rojos labios y era regado con lagrimones. ¡Era el desastre más grande que se puede imaginar! Jennie lloraba a voz en grito y uno o dos más se unieron a ella cordialmente, pero los demás siguieron comiendo tranquilamente, impasibles ante el horror que paralizaba a sus mayores.

¡Un anfitrión, arrebatarle la comida a un invitado! ¡Un anfitrión, pegar a un invitado! ¡Un caballero, pegar a una dama!

Constanza arrancó a Cyril de la silla y huyó con él a la habitación del niño (antaño la de Samuel), donde le dio un cachete y le dijo que era un niño muy, muy malo y que no sabía lo que iba a decir su padre. Limpió de pastel la pringosa boca —hasta donde pudo —y lo dejó encima de la cama. La señorita Jennie estaba llorando todavía cuando Constanza, ruborizada y tratando de sonreír, volvió al salón. No había manera de calmar a Jennie. Afortunadamente, su madre (que estaba a punto de darle un hermanito) no estaba presente. La señorita Insull había prometido llevarla a casa y se decidió llevarla entonces. El señor Critchlow, de un buen humor sardónico, dijo que se marchaba también; los tres salieron juntos, tras recibir muchos saludos y excusas de Constanza. Después todos fingieron, y dijeron en voz alta que aquellas cosas pasaban siempre en las fiestas infantiles. Y los parientes de los visitantes aseveraron que Cyril era un verdadero encanto y que en realidad el señor Povey no debía...

Pero el intento de guardar las apariencias fue un fracaso.

La Matusalén de los visitantes, una niña de casi ocho años, cruzó la habitación hasta donde estaba Constanza y le dijo en voz alta y tono confidencial y fatuo:

—Cyril ha sido muy grosero, ¿verdad, señora Povey?

La torpeza de los niños es a veces trágica.

Más tarde hubo un desfile de esponjosos fardos por la retorcida escalera y a través de la sala y demás hasta salir a King Street.

Y Constanza recibió muchas expresiones corteses y variadas súplicas de que se perdonase al adorable Cyril.

—Creí que habías dicho que el niño estaba en su habitación —dijo Samuel a Constanza entrando en la sala, cuando se hubo marchado el último invitado. Los dos evitaban la mirada del otro.

—Sí; ¿es que no está?

—No.

—¡Vaya con el jaimito! —lo de «jaimito» era una incursión a lo juguetón, encaminada a quitar importancia a la «jaimitada»—. Me imagino que habrá ido a buscar a Amy.

Constanza bajó hasta el arranque de la escalera de la cocina y llamó:

—Amy, ¿está Cyril ahí abajo?

—¿El señor Cyril? No, señora, pero estaba en la sala hace un momento, cuando se marcharon la primera y la segunda tandas. Le dije que subiera y que fuera buen chico.

Durante unos momentos no entró en la mente de Samuel ni en la de Constanza que Cyril pudiera haber desaparecido, que la casa no contuviera a Cyril. Pero una vez que entró, la sospecha se convirtió en certidumbre. Amy, al ser interrogada, rompió de pronto a llorar, admitiendo que tal vez la puerta lateral se hubiese quedado abierta cuando tras despedir a la «segunda tanda», criminalmente dejó solo a Cyril en la sala para bajar a la cocina. Estaba oscureciendo. Amy vio al indefenso inocente vagando toda la noche por las desiertas calles de una gran ciudad. Una visión similar de canales, ruedas de tranvía y puertas de sótano perturbó a Constanza. Samuel dijo que de todas formas no podía haber ido lejos, que alguien tenía que reparar en él y reconocerlo, y traerlo a casa. «Sí, claro —pensó la sensata Constanza—. Pero ¿y si...?».

Los tres volvieron a registrar toda la casa. Después, en el salón (que estaba en el triste estado de un anticlímax), dijo Amy:

—¡Eh, señor! Ahí está el pregonero, cruzando la Plaza. ¿No sería mejor que lo hiciera pregonar?

—Corra, Amy, que no se vaya —ordenó Constanza.

Y Amy salió a toda prisa.

Samuel y el añoso pregonero parlamentaron en la puerta lateral; las mujeres se quedaron en segundo plano.

—No *puó* pregonarlo sin mi campana —dijo arrastrando las palabras el pregonero, acariciando su gastado uniforme—. Me he *dejao* la campana en casa. Tengo *qu'ir* por la campana. *Usté* escríbalo en un papel *pa* que yo *puá leelo* y voy *p'allá* corriendo. La gente no *m'hará* ni caso si voy sin mi campana.

De este modo fue pregonado Cyril.

—Amy —llamó Constanza cuando ella y la muchacha se quedaron a solas—, no sirve de nada que se quede ahí gimoteando. ¡Vaya a trabajar y limpie ese salón, vamos! Seguro que encuentran pronto al niño. El señor ha salido también.

¡Valerosas palabras! Constanza ayudó con el salón y la cocina. El suyo era el sino de la mujer en las grandes crisis. Siempre hay platos que fregar.

Muy poco después entró Samuel Povey en la cocina por el pasadizo subterráneo que llevaba, más allá de los dos sótanos, al patio y a Brogham Street. Llevaba en los brazos una aborrecible masa negra. Aquella masa era Cyril, antaño blanco.

Constanza dio un grito. Era libre de dejarse dominar por sus sentimientos, pues casualmente Amy estaba arriba.

—¡No te acerques! —exclamó el señor Povey—. No está como para tocarlo.

Y el señor Povey hizo ademán de seguir adelante sin hacer caso de la madre.

—¿Dónde lo has encontrado?

—En el último sótano —dijo el señor Povey, forzado a detenerse después de todo—. Estuvo allá abajo conmigo ayer y se me ocurrió que lo mismo había vuelto allí.

—¡Cómo! ¿En esa oscuridad?

—¡Había encendido una vela, qué te crees! Yo había dejado una vela y una caja de cerillas a mano porque no terminé esos estantes.

—¡Bueno! —murmuró Constanza—¡No me puedo imaginar cómo se atrevió a ir allí solo!

—¿No puedes? —dijo el señor Povey cínicamente—. Yo sí. Lo hizo sencillamente para asustamos.

—¡Oh, Cyril! —amonestó Constanza al niño—, ¡Cyril!

El niño no mostraba emoción alguna. Su rostro era un enigma. Podía esconder hosquedad o simple indiferencia insensible, o una total inconsciencia del pecado.

—Dámelo —dijo Constanza.

—Yo me ocuparé de él esta tarde —dijo Samuel con severidad.

—Pero no puedes lavarlo —prosiguió Constanza, cuyo alivio cedía a la aprensión.

—¿Por qué no? —inquirió el señor Povey. Y se puso en marcha.

—Pero, Sam...

—¡Te digo que yo me ocuparé de él! —repitió el señor Povey en tono amenazador.

—Pero ¿qué vas a hacer? —preguntó Constanza con temor.

—Bien —respondió el señor Povey—, esta clase de cosas, ¿hay que resolverlas o no? —y se fue arriba.

Constanza lo alcanzó en la puerta de la habitación de Cyril.

El señor Povey no esperó a que hablase. Sus ojos echaban chispas.

—¡Oye! —la amonestó cruelmente—. ¡Tú vete abajo!

Y desapareció en la habitación con su inmunda e indefensa víctima.

Al cabo de un instante asomó la cabeza por la puerta. Constanza le había desobedecido. Salió al pasillo y cerró la puerta para que Cyril no lo oyera.

—Ahora, por favor, haz lo que te he dicho —dijo a su mujer entre dientes—. No tengamos una escena, por favor.

Ella bajó despacio, llorando. Y el señor Povey se retiró de nuevo al lugar de ejecución.

Amy casi se cayó encima de Constanza con la última bandeja de cosas del salón. Y Constanza tuvo que decir a la muchacha que habían encontrado a Cyril. Por alguna razón no pudo resistirse al instinto de decirle también que el señor se estaba ocupando del asunto. Entonces Amy se echó a llorar.

Pasada una hora aproximadamente reapareció por fin el señor Povey. Constanza estaba tratando de contar cucharillas de plata para el té en la sala.

—Ya está acostado —dijo el señor Povey con un magnífico intento de parecer desenfadado—. No debes ir ahora.

—Pero ¿lo has lavado? —gimoteó Constanza.

—Lo he lavado —contestó el sorprendente señor Povey.

—¿Qué le has hecho?

—Le he castigado, naturalmente —dijo el señor Povey como un dios que está por encima de las debilidades humanas—. ¿Qué esperabas que hiciera? Alguien tenía que hacerlo.

Constanza se secó los ojos con la punta del delantal blanco que se había puesto encima del vestido de seda nuevo. Se dejó vencer y aceptó la situación; se las arregló como pudo. Y se pasaron la tarde fingiendo lúgubre y pésimamente que sus corazones latían al unísono. La elaborada y risueña afabilidad del señor Povey resultaba extremadamente penosa.

Se fueron a dormir; en su habitación, Constanza, en pie junto a Samuel, abandonó de improviso toda simulación y, con ojos y voz agónicos, le dijo:

—Tienes que dejarme verlo.

Se miraron de frente. Por un breve instante Cyril dejó de existir para Constanza. Sólo Samuel la obsesionaba, y sin embargo parecía un hombre extraño, desconocido. En la vida de Constanza fue una de esas crisis en las que el alma humana parece estar a punto de adquirir un conocimiento misterioso y desconcertante y luego la oleada retrocede tan inexplicablemente como se había formado.

—¡Pues claro! —dijo el señor Povey, dándose la vuelta con celeridad, como queriendo decir que ella estaba haciendo una tragedia de nada.

Ella hizo un gesto involuntario de alivio casi pueril.

Cyril dormía tranquilamente. Fue un triunfo para el señor Povey.

Constanza no pudo dormir. Mientras yacía vagamente despierta al lado de su marido, lo último de su ser parecía estar temblando de emoción. ¡No era exactamente tristeza, ni exactamente alegría; era una emoción más elemental que éstas! ¡Una sensación de la intensidad de la vida en aquella hora, perturbadora, inquieta, pero no triste! Se dijo que Samuel tenía toda la razón, toda la razón. Y después se dijo que el pobrecito no tenía ni cinco años y que aquello era monstruoso. Los dos tenían que reconciliarse. Y nunca se podrían reconciliar. Ella estaría siempre entre los dos para reconciliarlos y para ser aplastada por su choque. Siempre tendría que llevar la carga de los dos. Jamás tendría reposo ni cesaría aquella tremenda preocupación y responsabilidad. No podía hacer cambiar a Samuel; ¡además, tenía razón! Y aunque Cyril no tenía ni cinco años, ella pensaba que tampoco podía hacerle cambiar. Era tan imposible hacerle cambiar como a una planta que está creciendo. No acudió a su mente el recuerdo de su madre ni de Sofía; sin embargo sintió algo parecido a lo que había sentido la señora Baines en ocasiones históricas; pero, como era de un natural más blando, era más joven y estaba menos desgastada por el destino, no fue consciente de amargura alguna, sino sólo de una solemne dicha.

Capítulo IV

UN CRIMEN

I

—Y ahora, señor Cyril —protestó Amy—, ¿quiere dejar ese fuego en paz? No es usted quien tiene que arreglar mis fuegos.

Un niño de nueve años, grande y corpulento para su edad, de cara redonda y cabello muy corto, se inclinaba sobre la humeante parrilla. Eran las ocho menos cinco de una fría mañana, después de Pascua. Amy, apresuradamente vestida con un traje azul y un basto delantal marrón encima, estaba poniendo la mesa del desayuno. El niño volvió la cabeza, todavía inclinado.

—Cállate, Ame —replicó sonriendo. Como la vida es corta, solía llamarla Ame cuando estaban solos—. Si no, te daré en el ojo con el atizador.

—Debería avergonzarse de sí mismo —dijo Amy—. Ya sabe que su mamá le dijo que se lavara los pies esta mañana y no lo ha hecho. La ropa bonita está muy bien, pero...

—¿Quién ha dicho que no me he lavado los pies? —preguntó Cyril con expresión culpable.

La alusión de Amy a la ropa bonita tenía que ver con el hecho de que aquella mañana el niño se había puesto su traje de los domingos en un día de semana por primera vez.

—Lo digo yo —respondió Amy.

Seguía teniendo el triple de años que él, pero siempre se habían tratado como iguales en lo intelectual.

—¿Y cómo lo sabes? —preguntó Cyril, cansado del fuego.

—Porque lo sé —dijo Amy.

—¡Pues entonces no lo sabes! —dijo Cyril—¿Y tus pies qué? Me daría pena verte los pies, Ame.

Amy, justificablemente, se enfadó. Sacudió la cabeza.

—Mis pies están tan limpios como los suyos cualquier día —dijo— Y se lo diré a su mamá.

Pero él no quiso dejar sus pies tranquilos y siguió uno de esos monótonos e inacabables altercados sobre un tema único que tienen lugar con tanta frecuencia entre iguales intelectuales cuando el uno es el joven hijo de la casa y la otra una sirvienta establecida que lo adora. Las mentes refinadas habrían hallado repugnante la charla, pero el sentimiento de repugnancia era al parecer desconocido para los dos reñidores. Al final, cuando Amy, valiéndose de una táctica superior, lo había arrinconado, Cyril dijo de pronto:

—¡Oh, vete al diablo!

Amy dio un golpe con el cucharón de la salsa.

—Ahora sí que se lo voy a decir a su mamá. Fíjese lo que le digo, esta vez sí que se lo voy a decir.

Cyril pensó que en efecto había ido demasiado lejos. Estaba totalmente seguro de que Amy no se lo diría a su madre. Y no obstante, ¡si por algún fenómeno insólito de su naturaleza lo hiciera! Las consecuencias serían indescriptibles; serían algo más que acabar con su íntima gloria en el uso de tan briosa palabra. Así que se rió —fue una risa tonta, nerviosa —para tranquilizarse.

—No te atreverás —dijo.

—¿Que no? —dijo ella en tono adusto—. Ya lo verá. ¡No sé dónde lo aprende! ¡No lo puedo entender! Pero a Amy Bates no le dice palabrotas nadie. ¡En cuanto entre su mamá en esta habitación!

La puerta del pie de la escalera crujió y Constanza entró en la habitación. Llevaba un vestido de merino color magenta; una cadena de oro le bajaba desde el cuello, cruzando su abundante seno. Apenas se le notaban los cinco años que habían pasado. Sería una sorpresa que la hubiesen alterado mucho, pues los años habían pasado sobre su cabeza con una velocidad increíble. A ella le parecía que habían pasado sólo unos meses desde la primera y última fiesta de Cyril.

—¿Estás preparado ya, corazón? Deja que te vea —saludó Constanza al chico con su habitual energía, alegre y suave.

Cyril echó una mirada a Amy, que volvió la cabeza y se dedicó a meter cucharas en tres platos.

—Sí, mamá —replicó con una voz nueva.

—¿Hiciste lo que te dije?

—Sí, mamá —dijo sin más.

—Está bien.

Amy hizo un ligero ruido con los labios y se fue.

Estaba salvado una vez más. Se dijo que nunca más permitiría que su alma se viese perturbada por una amenaza de la vieja Ame.

Constanza se metió la mano en el bolsillo y sacó un paquete duro envuelto en papel, con el que dio un golpecito en la cabeza de su hijo.

—¡Ay, mamá! —fingió que le había hecho daño; luego abrió el paquete. Contenía caramelos Congleton, un dulce que se tenía por inofensivo.

—¡Bien! —exclamó— ¡Bien! ¡Oh, gracias, mamá!

—Pero no empieces a comértelos ahora mismo.

—Sólo uno, mamá.

—¡No! ¡Y cuántas veces te he dicho que no pongas los pies en ese guardafuegos! Mira cómo está de doblado. Y no lo hace nadie más que tú.

—Lo siento.

—No sirve de nada decir que lo sientes si sigues haciéndolo.

—¡Ah, mamá, he tenido un sueño más divertido...!

Estuvieron charlando hasta que subió Amy con té y *bacon.* El fuego había pasado de negro a rojo vivo.

—Corre a decirle a papá que ya está el desayuno.

Al cabo de poco rato entró desde la tienda un hombre de cincuenta años con gafas, bajo y rechoncho, con el pelo gris y una barbita medio gris, medio negra. A Samuel se le notaban mucho los años, sobre todo en los gestos, que sin embargo seguían siendo rápidos. Se sentó inmediatamente —su mujer y su hijo estaban ya sentados— y sirvió el *bacon* con la veloz seguridad de quien no necesita preguntar acerca de gustos y apetitos. No se dijo una palabra, con excepción de una breve observación humorística de Samuel. Pero no había circunspección alguna. Samuel tenía una expresión blanda y benévola. Los ojos de Constanza eran una fuente de jovialidad. El muchacho estaba entre ellos, comiendo sin parar.

¡Una criatura misteriosa, aquel niño que crecía y crecía misteriosamente en la casa! Para su madre era una deliciosa alegría en todo momento salvo cuando desobedecía a su padre. Pero ahora llevaban mucho tiempo sin que hubiese tenido lugar un choque grave. El chico parecía estar ganando en virtud y en sentido común. Y lo cierto es que era encantador. Tan grandón (todo el mundo reparaba en ello) y sin embargo gracioso, ágil, con una sonrisa fascinadora. Sin hacer de menos a Samuel en su fiel corazón, Constanza veía claramente las singulares diferencias entre Samuel y el chico. Salvo en que era moreno y que de vez en cuando aparecía en aquellos ojos infantiles la «mirada peligrosa» de su padre, Cyril apenas se parecía ya de manera visible a éste. Era un Baines. Esto, naturalmente, aumentaba el orgullo familiar de Constanza. Sí; era misterioso para ella, aunque quizá no más que cualquier otro niño para cualquier otro progenitor. Era

igualmente misterioso para Samuel, pero por lo demás el señor Povey había aprendido a verlo como si fuera un paquete que siempre estuviera tratando de envolver con un papel imperceptiblemente demasiado pequeño. Cuando conseguía envolver una esquina se salía por otra, y esto seguía sucediendo constantemente y nunca lograba atar la cuerda. No obstante, la confianza del señor Povey en su habilidad como empaquetador se mantenía incólume. El muchacho era extrañamente sutil unas veces, pero otras era asombrosamente ingenuo y sus artimañas no engañarían ni al más lerdo. El señor Povey sabía que su hijo no podía competir con él; estaba orgulloso de él porque consideraba que no era un chico corriente; daba por sentado que su hijo no podía ser un chico corriente. Nunca o muy rara vez elogiaba a Cyril. Cyril tenía a su padre por un hombre que, en respuesta a cualquier petición, empezaba siempre contestando con un serio y pensativo «No, me temo que no».

—¡Ya veo que no has perdido el apetito! —comentó su madre.

Cyril sonrió.

—¿Pensabas que lo iba a perder, mamá?

—Déjame ver —dijo Samuel como recordando vagamente un hecho sin importancia—. Es hoy cuando empiezas a ir al colegio, ¿no?

«¡Ojalá no fuera papá tan borrico!», reflexionó Cyril. Y, teniendo en cuenta que este comienzo del colegio (del colegio de verdad, no de un colegio de niñas, como antes) había constituido el tema principal en la casa durante días y semanas; teniendo en cuenta que ocupaba y llenaba todos los corazones, la reflexión de Cyril era justificable.

—Y bien, hijo mío, hay algo que debes recordar siempre —dijo el señor Povey—. La puntualidad. Nunca llegues tarde ni al ir al colegio ni al volver a casa. Y, para que no tengas ninguna excusa —el señor Povey acentuó la palabra «excusa», como si condenase a Cyril anticipadamente—, aquí hay algo para ti —dijo las últimas palabras con celeridad, con una suerte de modesta vergüenza.

Era un reloj de plata con su cadena.

Cyril se quedó estupefacto. Constanza también, pues el señor Povey sabía matarlas callando. De tarde en tarde daba pruebas, así, de ser un alma grande, capaz de acciones sublimes. El reloj era una eflorescencia única del profundo aunque áspero afecto del señor Povey. Allí estaba, sobre la mesa, como un milagro. Aquél fue un gran día, un día de lo más emocionante de la historia de Cyril y no menos de la de sus padres.

El reloj le quitó el apetito a su dueño.

Aquella mañana se dejó de lado la rutina. El padre no volvió a la tienda. Al final llegó el momento en que se puso el abrigo y el sombrero para llevar a Cyril y al reloj y la cartera de Cyril al colegio, que tenía su sede en el Instituto Wedgwood, cerca de allí. ¡Fue una partida solemne, y Cyril no pudo fingir con su comportamiento que no lo era! Constanza quería darle un beso, pero se contuvo. A él no le habría gustado. Los contempló desde la ventana. Cyril era casi tan alto como su padre, es decir, no era casi tan alto como él, pero le iba llegando al hombro. Pensó que los ojos de la ciudad estaban sin duda fijos en la pareja. Se sentía muy feliz y nerviosa.

A la hora de comer parecía probable el triunfo; a la hora del té, cuando llegó Cyril a casa debajo de un birrete y con la cartera llena de libros nuevos y la cabeza llena de ideas nuevas, el triunfo se logró clara y verdaderamente. Lo habían puesto en tercer curso y anunció que pronto sería el primero. Estaba encantado con la vida en el colegio; le agradaban los demás chicos y al parecer él también agradaba a los demás. La cosa era que, con un reloj de plata nuevo y un paquete de dulces, había empezado su nueva carrera en las circunstancias más ventajosas. Además, poseía cualidades que le aseguraban el éxito en el colegio. Era grande y de trato fácil, tenía una sonrisa cautivadora y una señalada aptitud para aprender las cosas que los chavales insisten en enseñar a sus nuevos compañeros. Tenía músculos, comportamiento valeroso y ningún engreimiento.

Durante el té, la sala empezó a acostumbrarse a un nuevo vocabulario, que contenía palabras como «los tipos», «castigado», «escribir cien veces», «chorrada», «recreo», «de miedo». Los padres, en especial el señor Povey, se sintieron inclinados a desaprobar algunas de estas palabras, pero no pudieron hacerlo, pues por alguna razón no encontraron al parecer ocasión de hacerlo; fueron arrastrados por la corriente y, al fin y al cabo, el entusiasmo y el placer que sentían por la novedad, tan romántica, eran tan intensos y casi tan ingenuos como los de su hijo.

Demostró que a menos que le dejaran quedarse levantado hasta más tarde que antes no podría hacer los deberes y en consecuencia no podría mantener el puesto al que su talento le daba derecho. El señor Povey

sugirió, aunque sin mucha convicción, que podía levantarse más temprano por la mañana. La propuesta fue rechazada de plano. Todos sabían y admitían que nada más que los escorpiones de la necesidad absoluta o una ocasión tremenda, como la de aquella mañana concreta, sacarían a Cyril de la cama antes de que le llegase de la cocina el olor del *bacon.* La mesa de la sala se consagró a sus lecciones. Se hizo de todos sabido que «Cyril estaba estudiando sus lecciones». Su padre examinó los nuevos libros de texto mientras Cyril, condescendientemente, le explicaba que todos los demás estaban superados y no valían. Su padre logró mantener una apariencia de conservar su equilibrio mental, pero no así su madre, que renunció, ella, que hasta aquel día, bajo la dirección del padre, le había enseñado casi todo lo que sabía; Cyril pasó por encima de ella entrando en regiones de conocimiento donde ella no tenía pretensión alguna de poder seguirlo.

Después de que los deberes estuvieran terminados, Cyril se limpiara los dedos con trozos de papel secante y su padre expresara su cualificada aprobación y se fuera a la tienda, Cyril dijo a su madre con la seductora vacilación que lo dominaba a veces:

—Mamá.

—¿Qué, cariño?

—Quiero pedirte un favor.

—Bien, ¿qué es?

—No; tienes que prometérmelo.

—Lo haré si puedo.

—Pero sí que puedes. No se trata de hacer. Se trata de no hacer.

—Venga, Cyril, suéltalo ya.

—No quiero que vengas más a verme cuando estoy dormido.

—Pero, grandísimo tonto, ¿qué diferencia hay porque estés dormido?

—No quiero que lo hagas. Es como si fuera un bebé. Algún día tendrás que dejar de hacerlo, conque igual te da que sea ahora.

Fue así como se propuso volver la espalda a su juventud.

Constanza sonrió. Era incomprensiblemente feliz. Continuó sonriendo.

—Entonces me lo prometes, ¿verdad, mamá?

Le dio unos golpecitos cariñosos en la cabeza con el dedal. Él lo entendió como un gesto de asentimiento.

—Eres un bebé —murmuró ella.

—Bueno, confío en ti —dijo él, sin hacer caso— Di «palabra de honor».

—Palabra de honor.

¡Con qué larga caricia lo siguieron sus ojos mientras subía a su habitación con sus grandes y desmañadas piernas! Sentía gratitud porque el colegio no hubiera contaminado a aquel adorable inocente. Si ella hubiera podido ser Ame durante veinticuatro horas, tal vez no hubiera vacilado en meterle mantequilla en la boca sin temor a que se fundiera.

El señor Povey y Constanza estuvieron hasta tarde hablando en voz baja aquella noche. Ninguno de los dos podía dormir; sentían pocos deseos de dormir. El rostro de Constanza decía a su marido: «Siempre he defendido a ese chico, a pesar de tus severidades; ¡ya ves cuánta razón tenía!». Y el rostro del señor Povey decía: «Ya ves el brillante éxito de mi sistema. Ya ves cómo se justifican mis teorías educativas. Nunca había ido al colegio, excepto a esa espantosa escuela de niñas, y va casi derecho al primer puesto del tercer curso, ¡a los nueve años!». Discutieron su futuro. Puede que no fuera una locura discutir su futuro hasta cierto punto, pero los dos pensaban que discutir la carrera definitiva de un niño de nueve años no era propio de un progenitor sensato, sólo los estúpidos tendrían semejante pasión. No obstante, los dos se morían por discutir su carrera definitiva. Constanza cedió antes a la tentación. El señor Povey se burló de ella y luego, para

seguirle la corriente, cedió también. La cuestión estuvo enseguida sobre el tapete. Constanza se sintió también aliviada al ver que el señor Povey no había pensado en modo alguno en poner a Cyril en la tienda. No; el señor Povey 110 deseaba cortar madera con una hoja de afeitar. Su hijo debía ascender y ascendería. ¡Médico! ¡Notario! ¡Abogado! Abogado no; era una fantasía. Cuando llevaban media hora discutiendo, el señor Povey insinuó repentinamente que la conversación era indigna del práctico sentido común de ambos y se durmió.

II

Nadie pensaba realmente que aquel ideal estado de cosas durase mucho: una empresa iniciada con tal gloria está sin duda abocada a atravesar períodos de dificultad e incluso de desastre temporal. Mas ¡no! Cyril parecía estar especialmente hecho para el colegio. Antes de que el señor Povey y Constanza se hubiesen acostumbrado del todo a ser los padres de «un gran chico», antes de que Cyril hubiera roto el cristal de su milagroso reloj más de una vez, el trimestre de verano había terminado y llegó la excitación de la entrega de premios, como se denominaba; en aquella época los colegios más pequeños no habían tenido la desfachatez de llamar «día de entrega de premios» a la ceremonia de finalización de las clases. Dicha entrega proporcionó una alegría especial al señor y a la señora Povey. Aunque los premios eran notablemente escasos en número —en parte para aumentar su importancia, en parte para reducir su coste (la fundación era pobre)—, Cyril obtuvo un premio, una caja de instrumentos geométricos *de* precisión; también llegó al primer puesto de su clase y fue ascendido al formidable cuarto curso. Samuel y Constanza fueron recibidos una tarde estival en el gran salón del Instituto Wedgwood y vieron a toda la Junta de Gobierno en un estrado y, en medio, lo que él definió con su aristocrático acento londinense como «una mísera colección de recompensas», al anciano y famoso sir Thomas Wilbraham, ex diputado y el último respetable miembro de su antiguo linaje. Y sir Thomas entregó a Cyril la caja de instrumentos y le estrechó la mano. Y todo el mundo iba muy bien vestido. Samuel, que nunca había ido más que a una escuela nacional, recordaba los sencillos rigores de su propia infancia y se inflaba; ciertamente figuraba entre los más ricos de los padres presentes. Cuando, en la informal promiscuidad que siguió a la entrega de premios, Cyril se reunió con su padre y con su madre, hicieron tímidamente todo lo posible, como es debido, para restar importancia a los logros de su hijo y no lo consiguieron. Las paredes del salón estaban cubiertas de productos de la habilidad de los alumnos; se observó que el director llamaba la atención de los notables hacia un mapa de Irlanda hecho por Cyril. Estaba claro que era un mapa de Irlanda, pues Irlanda era el mapa que elige todo colegial que se ponga a dibujar un mapa cuando tiene libertad para elegir. Para un chico de tercer año se consideró una obra maestra. En el sombreado de montañas Cyril era ya un prodigio. Nunca había indicado un miembro de la escuela los Montes Macgillicuddy —se dijo— con un sutil refinamiento más sorprendente que el joven Povey. Por un justo orgullo de sí mismos, por temor a ser secretamente acusados de ostentación por otros padres, Samuel y Constanza no se acercaron a aquel mapa. Por lo demás, habían vivido semanas con él y Samuel (que al fin y al cabo estaba decidido a no quedarse a la altura del betún con su hijo) le había raspado una mancha de una manera tan perfecta que desafiaba el examen más inquisitivo.

La fama de aquel mapa, añadida a la caja de compases y al propio deseo de Cyril, señalaban una carrera artística. Cyril dibujaba y pintarrajeaba desde siempre; el maestro de dibujo del colegio, que era también profesor de la Escuela de Arte, había sugerido que acudiese a ésta una tarde a la semana. Samuel, sin embargo, no quiso ni oír hablar de ello: Cyril era demasiado pequeño. Es cierto que Cyril era demasiado pequeño, pero la verdadera objeción de Samuel era que Cyril saliera solo tan tarde. En esto se mostró inflexible.

Los miembros de la Junta habían descubierto recientemente que en un buen colegio hacía falta una sección de deportes y habían alquilado allá en Bleakridge un campo para cricket, fútbol y otros juegos, una innovación que demostraba que la ciudad avanzaba con los veloces tiempos. En junio se abrió el campo después de las horas de clase hasta las ocho de la tarde y los sábados. El propietario se enteró de que Cyril tenía talento para el cricket; el muchacho quería practicarlo por las tardes y estaba totalmente dispuesto a obligarse con juramentos bíblicos a levantarse por la mañana a la hora que fuera para estudiar. No tenía muchas esperanzas de que su padre dijera «sí», ya que su padre nunca decía «sí», pero de todas formas se lo pidió. Samuel lo dejó perplejo diciéndole que las tardes que hiciese buen tiempo, cuando pudiera dejar la tienda, iría a Bleakridge con su hijo. A Cyril no le gustó ni lo más mínimo. Con todo, se podía intentar. Fueron una tarde en el nuevo tren que había sustituido a los viejos tranvías de caballos y que hacía todo el trayecto hasta Longshaw, un lugar que Cyril sólo conocía de oídas. Samuel hablaba de los juegos que se practicaban en las Cinco Ciudades en su juventud, del titánico deporte de las barras, cuando el equipo de una «orilla» acudía al desafío de la otra «orilla» precedido de una banda de tambores y pífanos y cuando, en el acaloramiento de

la persecución, un hombre podía incluso saltar al canal para escapar de su perseguidor; Samuel no había jugado nunca al cricket.

Samuel, con un nieto muy joven de *Fan* (que había fallecido), se sentó con dignidad en la hierba y observó a su jugador por espacio de una hora (mientras Constanza no perdía de vista la tienda y supervisaba su cierre). Después, Samuel llevó de nuevo a casa a Cyril. Al cabo de dos días el padre se ofreció *motu proprio* a repetir la experiencia. Cyril se negó. En el ínterin se le habían hecho insinuaciones en el colegio de que era un crío en mantillas.

Con todo, en otros aspectos Cyril resultaba a veces sorprendentemente victorioso. Por ejemplo, un día llegó a casa con la información de que un perro que no es un bullterrier no es digno de llamarse perro. Al nieto de *Fan* se lo había llevado un hueso de pollo que le perforó las entrañas y Cyril consiguió convencer a su padre de que comprase un fox terrier. El animal era de una fealdad superlativa, pero padre e hijo rivalizaban en los elogios de su extraordinaria belleza y Constanza, por su buen natural, se unió a la ficción. Lo llamaron *León;* la tienda, tras uno o dos episodios indecorosos, le fue absolutamente prohibida.

Pero el más asombroso de los éxitos de Cyril tuvo que ver con la cuestión de las vacaciones anuales. Empezó a hablar del mar a poco de convertirse en un colegial. Al parecer, su completo desconocimiento del mar le resultaba perjudicial en el colegio. Además, siempre le había entusiasmado el mar; había dibujado cientos de barcos de tres palos con las bonetas desplegadas y sabía qué diferencia hay entre un bergantín y una goleta. La primera vez que dijo: «Oye, mamá, ¿por qué no vamos este año a Llandudno en vez de a Buxton?», su madre pensó que se había vuelto loco, pues la idea de ir a cualquier sitio que no fuese Buxton era inconcebible. ¿No habían ido siempre a Buxton? ¿Qué diría su casera? ¿Cómo podrían volver a mirarla a la cara? Además..., ¡bueno...! Fueron a Llandudno, bastante asustados y sin saber el cambio que había acontecido. Pero fueron. Y fue la fuerza de la voluntad de Cyril, en teoría un cero a la izquierda, la que los llevó.

III

El traslado del colegio a unos locales más espaciosos en Shawport Hall, una antigua mansión con cincuenta habitaciones y cinco hectáreas de terreno alrededor, no fue un cambio muy del agrado de Samuel y Constanza Reconocían sus ventajas en punto a higiene, pero Shawport Hall se hallaba a tres cuartos de milla de la Plaza de San Lucas, en la hondonada que separa Bursley de su suburbio de Hillport, mientras que el Instituto Wedgwood estaba a un minuto escaso. Fue como si Cyril, la mañana que partió para Shawport Hall, saliese de su esfera de influencia. Estaba a leguas de distancia, haciendo Dios sabía qué. Además, su tiempo para la comida se acortó a causa del tiempo extra requerido para el viaje de ida y vuelta y llegaba tarde al té; se puede decir que a menudo llegaba muy tarde al té; toda la maquinaria de éste resultó perturbada. A Samuel y Constanza aquellas cosas les parecían enormemente importantes, como si amenazaran los cimientos mismos de la existencia. Luego se fueron acostumbrando al nuevo orden y a veces, cuando pasaban por delante del Instituto Wedgwood y el insalubre patio, antaño único terreno de juego de los chicos, se asombraban de que el colegio pudiera habérselas «apañado» en los estrechos dominios que en tiempos le fueran asignados.

Cyril, aunque obtenía constantes éxitos en el colegio, iba hacia arriba, traía a casa infaliblemente buenos informes y recibía premios con regularidad, fue resultando cada vez menos satisfactorio en casa. De vez en cuando se quedaba castigado; aunque su padre fingía opinar que quedarse castigado era un baldón en el honor de una familia intachable, Cyril seguía quedándose castigado: un pecador empedernido que había perdido la vergüenza. Pero no era esto lo peor. Lo peor era, sin duda alguna, que Cyril se estaba volviendo «grosero». No se podía formular contra él ninguna acusación concreta; el delito era general, vago, permanente; estaba en todo lo que hacía y decía, en todos sus gestos y movimientos. Gritaba, silbaba, cantaba, golpeaba el suelo con los pies, tropezaba, embestía. Omitía ritos vacíos como decir «sí» o «por favor» y limpiarse la nariz. Contestaba con aspereza e indiferencia a preguntas corteses o no contestaba hasta que se le repetía la pregunta, y aun entonces con un aire «absorto» que no era auténtico. Daba pena ver los cordones de sus zapatos; sus uñas no estaban como para que las viera una mujer decorosa; su pelo era tan desastrado como su conducta; casi hacía falta amenazarlo con una pistola para que se pusiese aceite capilar. En suma, ya no era el pulcro muchachito de antes. Se había deteriorado sin lugar a dudas. ¡Qué doloroso! Pero ¿qué se puede esperar cuando el chico de uno se ve obligado, mes tras mes y año tras año, a asociarse con otros chicos? Al fin y al cabo era un buen chico, se decía Constanza, a menudo a sí misma y de vez en cuando a Samuel. Para Constanza, su encanto se renovaba eternamente. Su sonrisa, sus frecuentes ingenuidades, su gracioso gesto de

timidez cuando quería «engatusarla»; no perdía aquellas características, y tampoco su puro corazón; ella podía leerlo en sus ojos. Samuel era hostil a su gusto por los deportes y a sus triunfos en ellos, pero para Constanza eran un orgullo. Le gustaba tocarlo y mirarlo, y percibir aquel ligero olor a sudor que se adhería a su ropa.

Así llegó a los trece años. Y sus padres que, a pesar de la idea que tenían de sí mismos como unos despabilados progenitores, eran una pareja sencilla, nunca sospecharon que su corazón, que imaginaban todavía puro, se había convertido en una horrible masa de corrupción.

Cierto día se personó el director en la tienda. Ahora bien, ver al director de un colegio paseándose por la ciudad en horas de clase es un espectáculo que sobresalta y puede producir la misma extraña impresión que tiene uno cuando, a solas en una habitación, cree ver moverse algo que no debería moverse. El señor Povey se sobresaltó. Al señor Povey le latía con fuerza el corazón cuando condujo al director al rincón apartado en el que se encontraba su pupitre. «¿Qué se le ofrece?», estuvo a punto de decir al director. Pero no lo dijo. Estaba claro que el horno no estaba para bollos. El director estuvo cosa de un cuarto de hora hablando al señor Povey en voz cautelosamente baja y después dio por terminada la entrevista. El señor Povey lo acompañó cruzando la tienda y el director dijo en voz normal:

—Por supuesto, no es nada. Pero mi experiencia es que más vale asegurarse, y pensé decírselo. Hombre prevenido vale por dos. Tengo que ver a otros padres.

Se estrecharon la mano en la puerta. Después el señor Povey salió a la calle y, delante de toda la Plaza, detuvo otro minuto al reacio director.

Estaba muy sonrojado cuando volvió a entrar en la tienda. Las dependientas se encorvaron más sobre su trabajo. No corrió a la sala al momento a hablar con Constanza. Había adquirido la costumbre de llevar a cabo muchas operaciones con su sola inteligencia. La confianza que tenía en su propia capacidad había aumentado con el paso de los años. Además, en su fuero interno se había formado una imagen del señor Povey como la sede del gobierno y otra de Constanza y de Cyril como una especie de oposición permanente. No hubiera reconocido tener tal visión, pues era absolutamente leal a su esposa, pero allí estaba. Esta visión no confesada era una de las diversas causas que habían contribuido a intensificar su inherente tendencia hacia el maquiavelismo y el secreto. No dijo nada a Constanza ni tampoco a Cyril, pero, al encontrarse casualmente con Amy en el entresuelo, le vino la idea de interrogarla con severidad. El resultado fue que bajaron juntos al sótano, Amy llorando. A ésta se le ordenó estarse callada. Y como tenía un miedo cerval al señor Povey, se estuvo callada.

Durante varios días no ocurrió nada. Entonces, una mañana —era el cumpleaños de Constanza: los niños tienen casi siempre una suerte espantosa en la elección de días para pecar—, el señor Povey, que había realizado unos movimientos misteriosos en la tienda tras la marcha de Cyril al colegio, se encasquetó el sombrero y salió en persecución de Cyril, al que alcanzó en la esquina de Oldcastle Street y Acre Passage en compañía de otros dos muchachos.

Cyril se quedó como si se hubiese convertido en una estatua de sal.

—¡Vuelve a casa! —dijo severamente el señor Povey, y luego, por los otros chicos—: Disculpad.

—Pero voy a llegar tarde al colegio, papá —le apremió débilmente Cyril.

—No importa.

Cruzaron juntos la tienda, suscitando una tremenda emoción reprimida, y asustaron a Constanza al presentarse en la sala. Constanza estaba cortando paja y cintas para hacer un marco para un dibujo a la acuarela de una rosa de musgo que su hijo de puro corazón le había regalado para su cumpleaños.

—¿Qué...?, ¿cómo...? —exclamó. No dijo más en el momento porque estaba segura, por las caras de los dos, de que se avecinaban terribles acontecimientos.

—Deja la cartera —ordenó fríamente el señor Povey—. Y quítate la gorra —añadió con una entonación peculiar, como si se alegrara de probar con ello que Cyril era uno de esos chicos groseros a los que hay que decir que se quiten el sombrero dentro de una habitación.

—¿Qué es lo que pasa? —murmuró Constanza cuando Cyril obedeció la orden—, ¿Qué es lo que pasa?

El señor Povey no dio una respuesta inmediata. Estaba a cargo de aquellos procederes y deseaba fervientemente llevarlos a cabo con dignidad y total eficacia. Él, un hombrecillo grueso de más de cincuenta años, de rostro marchito y cabello y barba grises, estaba tan nervioso como un jovenzuelo. Y Constanza,

corpulenta matrona que pasaba de los cuarenta, estaba tan nerviosa como una muchachita. Cyril se había puesto muy pálido. Los tres se estaban poniendo malos.

—¿Qué dinero llevas en los bolsillos? —preguntó el señor Povey a modo de inicio.

Cyril, que no había tenido oportunidad de preparar su defensa, no contestó nada.

—Ya has oído lo que he dicho —tronó el señor Povey.

—Llevo tres medios peniques —murmuró Cyril con desánimo, mirando al suelo. Su labio inferior parecía colgar precariamente separándose de la encía.

—¿De dónde los has sacado?

—Son parte de lo que me dio mamá —dijo el chico.

—Yo le di tres peniques la semana pasada —terció Constanza con aire culpable—. Hacía mucho que no tenía dinero.

—Si se lo diste tú, no hay más que decir —dijo rápidamente el señor Povey; luego, al muchacho —: ¿Es eso todo lo que llevas?

—Sí, papá —dijo él.

—¿Estás seguro?

—Sí, papá.

Cyril estaba jugando a un juego peligroso y arriesgando mucho, y con gran desventaja; actuó como pudo. Protegió sus intereses lo mejor que pudo.

El señor Povey se sintió obligado a correr un grave riesgo.

—Vacíate los bolsillos, pues.

Cyril, dándose cuenta de que había perdido aquella partida concreta, se vació los bolsillos.

—Cyril —dijo Constanza—, ¿cuántas veces te he dicho que cambies el pañuelo con más frecuencia? ¡Fíjate en ése!

¡Asombrosa criatura! ¡Estaba en el séptimo infierno de la aprensión y aun con todo dijo aquello!

Después del pañuelo apareció el habitual surtido de artículos que llevan los colegiales, útiles y mágicos, y finalmente ¡un florín[36] de plata!

El señor Povey se sintió aliviado.

—¡Oh, Cyril! —lloriqueó Constanza.

—Dáselo a tu madre —dijo el señor Povey.

El chico se adelantó torpemente y Constanza, llorando, tomó la moneda.

—Por favor, mírala, Constanza —le dijo su marido—. Y dime si lleva una cruz marcada.

Las lágrimas de Constanza no le permitían verla claramente. Tuvo que secarse los ojos.

—Sí —musitó débilmente—. Lleva algo.

—Eso pensé —dijo el señor Povey—, ¿De dónde la robaste? —interrogó.

—De la caja —respondió Cyril.

—¿Has robado algo de la caja antes?

—Sí.

—¿Sí, qué?

—Sí, papá.

—Sácate las manos de los bolsillos y ponte derecho, si no te importa. ¿Cuántas veces?

—No... no sé, papá.

—La culpa es mía —dijo con franqueza el señor Povey—, La culpa es mía. La caja tenía que estar siempre cerrada con llave. Todas las cajas tenían que estar siempre cerradas con llave. Pero pensábamos que podíamos confiar en las dependientas. ¡Si alguien me llega a decir que sería mi propio hijo el ladrón, habría..., bueno, no sé lo que habría dicho!

El señor Povey tenía motivos para culparse a sí mismo. El hecho era que el funcionamiento de aquella caja era una reliquia patriarcal que debía haber cambiado, pero jamás se le había ocurrido hacerlo, tan acostumbrado estaba a ella. En tiempos de John Baines, la caja, con sus tres compartimentos, dos para la plata y uno para el cobre (el oro no se metía nunca en ella), estaba invariablemente cerrada con llave. La persona a cargo de la tienda sacaba de ella el cambio para las dependientas o autorizaba temporalmente a una de ellas. El oro se guardaba en una bolsita de tela y ésta a su vez en un cajón del pupitre, cerrado con llave. El contenido de la caja no se comprobaba nunca mediante un sistema de teneduría de libros, ya que no lo había; cuando todas las transacciones, ya sean de pago ya de cobro, se hacen en efectivo —los Baines nunca tuvieron un penique fuera de las cuentas generales trimestrales, que eran liquidadas instantáneamente con los viajantes — no es indispensable un sistema de teneduría de libros. La caja estaba situada justo a la entrada de la tienda desde la casa; se hallaba en la parte más oscura de la tienda y el desdichado Cyril tenía que pasar todos los días por delante cuando se iba al colegio. Todo era perfecto para fabricar delincuentes juveniles.

—¿Y cómo te has estado gastando ese dinero? —inquirió el señor Povey.

Las manos de Cyril se deslizaron de nuevo en los bolsillos. Luego, dándose cuenta del descuido, las sacó.

—En dulces —dijo.

—¿Algo más?

—Dulces y cosas.

—¡Oh! —exclamó el señor Povey— Bien; ahora puedes bajar al sótano de la ceniza y traer todas las cosas que están en esa cajita del rincón. ¡Anda para allá!

Y para allá fue Cyril. Tuvo que pasar con aire fanfarrón por la cocina.

—¿Qué le dije, señor Cyril? —le preguntó Amy imprudentemente—, Bien se la ha cargado esta vez.

«Cargársela» era una palabra que había aprendido de Cyril.

—¡Tú sigue, vieja bruja! —gruñó Cyril.

Cuando volvió del sótano le dijo Amy, enfadada:

—Le dije que se lo diría a su padre la próxima vez que me llamara eso, y se lo voy a decir. Fíjese lo que le digo.

—¡Acusica! ¡Acusica! —replicó él—. ¿Te crees que no sé quién ha largado? ¡Acusica! ¡Acusica!

Arriba, en la sala, Samuel estaba explicando el asunto a su mujer. Había habido una auténtica epidemia de fumeteo en el colegio. El director lo había descubierto y, según esperaba, había acabado con ella. Lo que le había preocupado, mucho más que el que se fumase, fue que se había encontrado que unos cuantos chicos poseían pipas y boquillas caras. El director, astutamente, no confiscó aquellos artículos y se limitó a informar a los padres. En su opinión, aquellos artículos tenían un único origen, un ladrón generoso; dejaba a los progenitores la tarea de averiguar cuáles de ellos habían traído al mundo un ladrón.

Había obtenido más información de Amy; no quedaba duda de que Cyril había estado proporcionando a sus compinches utensilios de fumar, los medios para los cuales suministraba la caja. Había dicho a Amy que las cosas que escondía en el sótano eran regalos de hermanos de sangre. Pero el señor Povey no se lo creía. De todos modos había marcado todas las monedas de plata de la caja por tres noches consecutivas y había vigilado la caja por la mañana desde detrás de la pila de piezas de merino; el florín que estaba sobre la mesa de la sala revelaba su éxito como detective.

Constanza se sentía culpable por Cyril. Mientras el señor Povey exponía el caso, ella no podía librarse de una sensación completamente irracional de pecado, por lo menos de especial responsabilidad. Le parecía como si Cyril fuera hijo suyo y no de Samuel. Evitaba la mirada de su esposo. Aquello era muy raro.

Entonces volvió Cyril y sus padres compusieron su expresión; el muchacho depositó junto al florín una pipa de espuma de mar de imitación en un estuche, una petaca, un cigarro que tenía una punta carbonizada pero la otra sin cortar y un paquete de cigarrillos medio vacío, sin etiqueta.

Nada pudo ocultarse al señor Povey. Los detalles eran penosos.

—¡Así que Cyril es un mentiroso y un ladrón, dejando a un lado que fuma! —concluyó el señor Povey.

Hablaba como si Cyril hubiera inventado extraños y monstruosos pecados. Pero en el fondo de su corazón una vocecita le decía que, por lo que respecta a fumar, él había dado ejemplo. El señor Baines no fumaba. El señor Critchlow no fumaba. Sólo hombres como Daniel fumaban.

Hasta entonces, el señor Povey había llevado las cosas a su satisfacción. Había probado el delito. Había hecho confesar a Cyril. Se había desvelado todo el asunto. Bien, ¿y ahora, qué? Cyril tendría que haberse deshecho en arrepentimiento; tendría que haber ocurrido algo dramático. Pero Cyril se limitaba a estar allí con la cabeza baja y aspecto enfurruñado y daba señales de los sentimientos apropiados.

El señor Povey consideró que, hasta que sucediese algo, tenía que remachar el clavo.

—¡Resulta que el comercio va cada día peor —dijo (era verdad)—y tú robas a tus padres para convertirte en un bruto y corromper a tus compañeros! ¡Me pregunto si tu madre no notó nunca el olor!

—¡Yo nunca me imaginé una cosa así! —dijo Constanza con aflicción.

Además, un joven lo bastante inteligente como para robar una caja suele ser lo bastante inteligente como para averiguar que el secreto de la seguridad cuando se fuma es usar pastillas refrescantes y no guardar el tabaco en los bolsillos un minuto más de lo imprescindible.

—No hay modo de saber cuánto dinero has robado —dijo el señor Povey—, ¡Un ladrón!

Si Cyril hubiera robado pasteles, mermelada, cuerda, cigarrillos, el señor Povey nunca hubiera dicho «ladrón» como lo dijo. ¡Pero dinero! El dinero era diferente. Y una caja no era una alacena o una despensa. Una caja era una caja. Cyril había atentado contra la base misma de la sociedad.

—¡Y en el cumpleaños de tu madre! —dijo también el señor Povey—. ¡Sólo puedo hacer una cosa! —continuó— Puedo quemar todo esto. ¡Fundado en mentiras! ¿Cómo te has atrevido?

Y arrojó al fuego... no el cuerpo del delito sino el dibujo a la acuarela de la rosa y la paja y la cinta azul para las ramas de las esquinas.

—¿Cómo te has atrevido? —repitió.

—Nunca me das dinero —murmuró Cyril.

Consideraba que marcar monedas era un truco mezquino; sacar a colación la mala marcha del negocio y el cumpleaños de su madre despertaba un demonio familiar que por lo general dormía tranquilamente en su seno.

—¿Qué es lo que dices? —casi gritó el señor Povey.

—Que nunca me das dinero —repitió el diablo en un tono más alto del que había empleado Cyril.

(Era verdad. Pero Cyril «no tenía más que pedir» y se le hubiera dado todo lo que fuera bueno para él.)

El señor Povey se levantó de un salto. El señor Povey también tenía un demonio. Los dos demonios se miraron fijamente un instante; después, reparando en que la cabeza de Cyril estaba por encima de la del señor Povey, el demonio mayor se dominó. El señor Povey tuvo de repente todo el drama que quería.

—¡Vete a la cama! —dijo con dignidad.

Cyril se fue en actitud desafiante.

—No tomará más que pan y agua, Constanza —concluyó el señor Povey. En conjunto estaba complacido consigo mismo.

Más tarde Constanza informó llorosa de que había subido a ver a Cyril y que éste había estado llorando, lo cual hablaba en su favor. Pero todos pensaban que la vida ya no volvería a ser igual. Durante el resto de sus vidas, aquel horror indescriptible se interpondría entre ellos de un modo odioso. Constanza no había sido nunca tan desgraciada. Algunas veces, cuando estaba sola, se rebelaba por unos instantes de la manera en que uno se rebela contra una pantomima que se ve obligado a tratar en serio. «Al fin y al cabo —susurraba para sí—, ¡y si ha cogido unos cuantos chelines de la caja, qué! ¿Qué pasa? ¿Qué importancia tiene?». Pero aquel estado de ánimo de insurrección moral contra la sociedad y el señor Povey eran muy pasajeros. Venían y se iban en un abrir y cerrar de ojos.

Capitulo V

OTRO CRIMEN

I

Cierta noche —el mismo año, unos seis meses después de la tragedia del florín —despertaron a Samuel Povey una mano en su hombro y una voz que le susurraba:

—¡Papá!

El ladrón y embustero estaba en camisa de noche junto a la cama. Los ojos somnolientos de Samuel lograron apenas distinguirlo en la densa penumbra.

—¿Qué..., qué? —preguntó, recobrando poco a poco la consciencia—, ¿Qué estás haciendo ahí?

—No quería despertar a mamá —dijo el muchacho en voz muy baja—. Hay alguien tirando tierra o algo a las ventanas, y lleva mucho rato.

—¿Eh? ¿Cómo?

Samuel miró fijamente al embustero y ladrón. El chico era alto; ya no era ningún chiquillo; sin embargo en aquel momento a su padre le pareció un chiquillo, una criatura en camisa de noche, con gestos e inflexiones infantiles y una deliciosa y extraña preocupación infantil por no molestar a su madre, que últimamente había dormido poco a causa de una enfermedad de Amy que había requerido cuidados. Su padre no lo había visto así desde hacía años. En aquel instante la convicción de que Cyril era permanentemente inadecuado para la sociedad humana se desvaneció de forma definitiva de la mente paterna. El tiempo la había debilitado ya muy considerablemente. La decisión de que, fuera Cyril lo que fuera, debían irse de vacaciones en verano como siempre, había supuesto un terrible golpe para ella. Y sin embargo, aunque Samuel y Constanza se habían acostumbrado a la compañía de un delincuente de tal manera que con harta frecuencia se olvidaban de su culpa durante largos períodos de tiempo, en Samuel había persistido la convicción de aquella lepra suya hasta aquel preciso instante, en el cual desapareció de forma extrañamente repentina, para el consciente alivio de Samuel.

Se oyó una lluvia de bolitas en la ventana.

—¿Oyes eso? —preguntó Cyril en dramáticos susurros—. ¡Y en mi ventana igual!

Samuel se levantó.

—Vuelve a tu habitación —ordenó con iguales susurros dramáticos, pero no como un padre a su hijo sino como un conspirador a otro.

Constanza estaba dormida. Oían su respiración regular.

Descalza, la figura mayor en camisón siguió a la más joven; uno detrás de otro hicieron crujir los dos escalones que separaban la habitación de Cyril de la de sus padres.

—Cierra la puerta sin hacer ruido —dijo Samuel.

Cyril obedeció.

Y después, tras encender la luz de gas de Cyril, Samuel descorrió las cortinas, abrió el pestillo de la ventana y empezó a abrir ésta con grandes precauciones para no hacer ruido. Todas las ventanas de guillotina de la casa eran difíciles de manejar. Cyril estaba junto a su padre, temblando sin saber por qué temblaba, sólo sorprendido de que su padre no le hubiese dicho que se metiera en la cama inmediatamente. Era sin duda alguna el momento de mayor orgullo de la trayectoria de Cyril. Además de las misteriosas circunstancias de la noche, la situación poseía esa emoción que siempre se comunica a un padre y a un hijo cuando están metidos en un empeño que ni se imagina la mujer para la cual sus vidas no tienen ningún secreto.

Samuel sacó la cabeza por la ventana.

Había allí un hombre.

—¿Eres tú, Samuel? —se oyó decir en voz baja.

—Si —dijo Samuel cautelosamente—, ¿No eres el primo Daniel?

—Tengo que hablar contigo —dijo Daniel Povey, cortante.

Samuel hizo una pausa.

—Bajo en un minuto —respondió.

Cyril recibió por fin la orden de meterse en la cama inmediatamente.

—¿Qué pasa, papá? —inquirió gozosamente.

—No lo sé. Voy a echarme algo encima e iré a ver.

Cerró la ventana cortando el paso a las brisas que se estaban colando en la habitación.

—¡Ahora, deprisa, antes de que apague el gas! —advirtió con la mano en la llave.

—Me lo dirás por la mañana, ¿verdad, papá?

—Sí —dijo el señor Povey, dominando su impulso habitual de decir «no».

Regresó sigilosamente al dormitorio grande para buscar a tientas algo de ropa.

Cuando, tras bajar a la sala y encender el gas, abrió la puerta lateral para que entrase el primo Daniel, no había ni rastro de éste. Luego vio una figura en la esquina de la Plaza. Silbó —Samuel tenía una singular facultad silbadora, la envidia de su hijo— y Daniel le hizo una seña. Apagó casi el gas y salió corriendo sin sombrero. Iba casi totalmente vestido, con excepción del cuello de la camisa y la corbata, y se había subido el cuello del abrigo.

Daniel avanzó delante de él sin esperarle y entró en la pastelería, que se hallaba enfrente. Como formaba parte del edificio más moderno de la Plaza, el establecimiento de Daniel contaba con uno de esos cierres metálicos que se bajan, con los que se cierra una tienda con un movimiento parecido al de dar cuerda a un gran reloj, en vez de cerrar veinte postigos diferentes uno por uno como en el siglo dieciséis. La puertecita de la gran hoja de hierro estaba abierta y Daniel se había internado en las tinieblas que había detrás de ella. En el mismo momento apareció un policía de ronda, aislando al señor Povey de Daniel.

—Buenas noches, oficial. ¡Brrr! —dijo el señor Povey, revistiéndose de dignidad y conduciéndose como si formase parte de sus hábitos normales hacer ejercicio sin cuello y con la cabeza descubierta en la Plaza de San Lucas las frías noches de noviembre. Se comportó de aquel modo porque estaba claro que si Daniel hubiera deseado los servicios de un policía se hubiese dirigido a aquél.

—Buenas noches, señor —dijo el policía tras reconocerlo.

—¿Qué hora es? —preguntó Samuel con osadía.

—La una y cuarto, señor.

El policía, dejando a Samuel ante la puertecita abierta, siguió adelante y cruzó la Plaza iluminada; Samuel entró en la tienda de su primo.

Daniel Povey estaba detrás de la puerta; cuando entró Samuel la cerró con un alarmante movimiento repentino. Con la excepción de la titilante luz de gas, la tienda se hallaba sumida en la oscuridad. Tenía la apariencia desierta que una pastelería y panadería bien dirigida tiene siempre por la noche. La gran balanza de latón, junto a las latas de harina, lanzaba destellos; las repisas de cristal de los pasteles, en los que apenas había algunos, apresaban también el tenue fulgor del gas.

—¿Qué pasa, Daniel? ¿Ocurre algo? —preguntó Samuel, con la sensación de ser un crío que tenía siempre en presencia de Daniel.

Aquel hombre bien parecido de cabellos blancos le agarró por el hombro con una fuerza que dejó a

Samuel convicto de fragilidad.

—Oye, Samuel —cuchicheó con su agradable voz, un tanto alterada por la excitación—, ¿Tú sabes que mi mujer bebe?

Miró a Samuel con expresión desafiante.

—N-no —respondió Samuel—, Es decir..., nadie ha dicho jamás...

Aquello era cierto. Él no sabía que la esposa de Daniel Povey, a los cincuenta años, se había dado claramente a la bebida. Había habido rumores de que se tomaba un vaso con demasiada delectación, pero «beber» significaba algo más que eso.

—Pues bebe —prosiguió Daniel Povey—. ¡Y lleva dos años haciéndolo!

—Lamento mucho lo que me dices —contestó Samuel, muy conmocionado por aquel brutal desgarramiento de la capa del decoro.

Todo el mundo había estado siempre fingiendo ante Daniel, al igual que Daniel ante todo el mundo, que su mujer era como las demás. Y ahora él mismo había hecho pedazos en un momento el velo tejido durante treinta años.

—¡Y si fuera eso lo peor! —murmuró reflexivamente Daniel, aflojando su apretón.

Samuel se sentía muy perturbado. Su primo estaba aludiendo a unos asuntos que él mismo, por lo menos, jamás había mencionado ni siquiera a Constanza, tan aborrecibles eran; unos asuntos inenarrables, que se cernían como nubes en la atmósfera social de la ciudad y de los cuales, muy de tarde en tarde, uno comunicaba su conocimiento no con palabras sirio con algo apenas perceptible en la mirada, en el tono de voz. No es frecuente que una ciudad como Bursley sea distinguida con una mujer como la esposa de Daniel Povey.

—Pero ¿qué ocurre? —preguntó Samuel tratando de mostrarse firme.

Y «¿qué ocurre?», se preguntó a sí mismo. «¿Qué significa todo esto, a la una y pico de la mañana?».

—Escucha, Samuel —empezó Daniel de nuevo, agarrándole por el hombro otra vez—. Hoy fui al Liverpool, al mercado del grano; perdí el último tren, de modo que vine en el correo desde Crewe. Y ¿qué es lo que me encuentro? Me encuentro a Dick sentado en las escaleras, a oscuras, casi desnudo.

—¿Sentado en las escaleras? ¿A Dick?

—¡Sí! ¡A esto vine a casa!

—Pero.:.

—¡Espera! Llevaba un par de días en cama con resfriado y fiebre, que había cogido por meterse en sábanas húmedas que su madre había olvidado airear. No le lleva nada de cenar esta noche. Él la llama. No hay respuesta. Entonces se levanta para ir abajo y ve lo que ha ocurrido, resbala en las escaleras y se rompe la rodilla o se la disloca. ¡Estuvo horas sentado allí, al parecer! No podía subir ni bajar.

—Y tu mujer... ¿estaba...?

—¡Borracha perdida en la sala, Samuel!

—Pero ¿y la criada?

—¡La criada! —rió Daniel Povey—. No podemos retener a nuestras criadas. No hay modo de que se queden. Tú ya lo sabes.

Lo sabía. Los métodos *y* peculiaridades domésticas de la señora Povey podían al menos discutirse libremente y así se hacía.

—¿Y qué has hecho?

—¿Hacer? Bueno, lo cogí en brazos y lo llevé arriba. ¡Y no sabes lo que me costó! ¡Ven! ¡Por aquí!

Daniel cruzó impulsivamente el local a grandes zancadas —la trampilla del mostrador estaba levantada

— y abrió una puerta en la parte de atrás. Samuel le siguió. Nunca había penetrado tanto antes en los secretos de su primo. A la izquierda estaba la escalera, en tinieblas; a la derecha una puerta cerrada, y delante una puerta abierta que daba a un patio. En el extremo de éste pudo distinguir un edificio vagamente iluminado y unas figuras desnudas que se movían extrañamente en su interior.

—¿Qué es eso? ¿Quién está ahí? —preguntó de pronto.

—Es la tahona —replicó Daniel, como sorprendido por aquella pregunta—. Es una de las noches largas.

Jamás, en lo poco que le quedaba de vida, comió Samuel un bocado de pan corriente sin recordar aquella aparición a medianoche. Llevaba medio siglo de vida y hasta entonces había comido pan irreflexivamente, como si las hogazas crecieran ya hechas en los árboles.

—¡Escucha! —le ordenó Daniel.

Aguzó el oído y captó un débil gemido lastimero procedente de uno de los pisos altos.

—¡Es Dick! ¡Es él!

Parecía más la congoja de un niño que la de un audaz joven de veinticuatro años.

—Pero ¿le duele? ¿Has avisado al médico?

—Todavía no —respondió Daniel, con la mirada ausente.

Samuel lo observó de cerca durante un segundo. Daniel le pareció muy viejo, indefenso y patético, un hombre que no estaba a la altura de la situación en la que se encontraba, y sin embargo, a pesar de las dignas nieves de la edad, nostálgicamente muchachil. Samuel pensó rápidamente: «Esto ha sido demasiado para él. Está casi fuera de sus cabales. Ésa es la explicación. Alguien tiene que hacerse cargo, y debo ser yo». Y toda la valerosa resolución de su carácter se preparó para hacer frente a la crisis. El ir sin cuello y en zapatillas y llevar los tirantes sujetos de cualquier manera parecía formar parte de la crisis.

—Subo un momento a echarle un vistazo —dijo Samuel en tono práctico.

Daniel no replicó.

En lo alto de la escalera brillaba una luz trémula. Samuel subió, encontró el surtidor del gas y lo abrió del todo. Se reveló ante sus ojos un pasillo lúgubre, sucio y mugriento, verdadera antesala de la incomodidad. Guiado por los gemidos, Samuel entró en un dormitorio que se hallaba en unas condiciones vergonzosas de abandono e iluminado solamente por una vela casi acabada. ¿Era posible que un ama de casa pudiera perder el respeto a sí misma hasta aquel punto? Samuel pensó en su propia morada, meticulosa e impecablemente mantenida, y en su alma brotó un profundo encono contra la esposa de Daniel Povey.

—¿Es usted, doctor? —dijo una voz desde la cama; cesaron los gemidos.

Samuel levantó la vela.

Allí estaba tendido Dick, sudando y con la cara, en la que se veía una barba de varios días, contorsionada por el sufrimiento; su alborotado cabello castaño estaba empapado en sudor.

—¿Dónde demonios está el médico? —interrogó el joven con brusquedad. Era evidente que la presencia de Samuel no le inspiraba curiosidad alguna; lo único que le sorprendía era que no se tratara del médico.

—Ya viene, ya viene —dijo Samuel en tono tranquilizador.

—Pues si no viene pronto me va a encontrar muerto —dijo Dick, con débil ira rencorosa—. Puedes estar seguro.

Samuel dejó la vela y bajó corriendo.

—Oye, Daniel —dijo, excitado y acalorado—, esto es ridículo, de verdad. ¿Por qué demonios no fuiste a buscar al médico mientras me esperabas? ¿Dónde está tu mujer?

Daniel Povey estaba echando con lentitud granos de maíz, que sacaba del bolsillo de su chaqueta, en uno de los grandes receptáculos que había detrás del mostrador, en la parte del local dedicado a panadería. Se

había aprovisionado con maíz como munición para lanzar a la ventana del dormitorio de Samuel; ahora estaba devolviendo el excedente.

—¿Vas a ir a buscar a Harrop? —preguntó vacilante.

—¡Pues claro! —exclamó Samuel—¿Dónde está tu mujer?

—Será mejor que vayas a echarle un vistazo —dijo Daniel Povey—. Está en la sala.

Precedió a Samuel hacia la puerta cerrada de la derecha. Cuando la abrió apareció la sala, totalmente iluminada.

—¡Aquí! ¡Entra! —dijo Daniel.

Samuel entró, atemorizado. En la estancia, tan desordenada y sucia como el dormitorio, yacía la señora Povey tendida de mala manera en un sofá de crin, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás, el rostro descolorido, los ojos saliéndosele de las órbitas, la boca húmeda y abierta; era un espectáculo terriblemente desagradable. Samuel estaba asustado; se sintió dominado por el temor y la repugnancia. La luz de gas caía implacable sobre aquella espantosa figura. ¡Una esposa y madre! ¡La señora de una casa! ¡El centro del orden! ¡La fuente de la curación! ¡El bálsamo de la inquietud y el refugio de la aflicción! Era repugnante. Su escaso cabello, de un gris amarillento, estaba sucio; su cuello era todo mugre; sus manos, abominables; su vestido negro se caía a pedazos. Era la deshonra de su sexo, de su posición y de su edad. Era algo más asqueroso de lo que el inexperto Samuel hubiese podido imaginar jamás. ¡Y junto a la puerta se hallaba su marido, pulcro, impecable, casi majestuoso, el hombre que durante treinta años había recurrido a todo su inmenso orgullo para soportar a aquella mujer, el hombre jovial que se reía a las duras y a las maduras! Samuel se acordó de cuando se casaron. Y se acordó de cuando, años después de su boda, ella seguía siendo tan bonita, afectada, coqueta e inflexible en sus caprichos como una joven ramera con un estúpido a sus pies. El tiempo y la lenta ira de Dios la habían transformado.

Conservó el dominio de sí mismo y se aproximó a ella; después se detuvo.

—Pero... —balbuceó.

—¡Sí, Sam, muchacho! —dijo el viejo desde la puerta—, ¡Me temo que la he matado! ¡Me temo que la he matado! La agarré y la zarandeé. La cogí por el cuello. Y antes de darme cuenta de dónde estaba, lo había hecho. Nunca volverá a beber coñac. ¡Eso es lo que ha pasado!

Se alejó.

Samuel sintió un hormigueo en todo el cuerpo cuando una intensa ola de emoción atravesó su ser. Fue como si alguien le hubiese dado un golpe de una violencia inconcebible. Su corazón tembló como tiembla un barco en un choque de olas descomunales. Se sentía entumecido. Sintió deseos de llorar, de vomitar, de morirse, de desaparecer. Pero una voz susurró en su interior: «Tendrás que pasar por esto. Tienes que encargarte tú». Pensó en *su* mujer y en su hijo, que dormían inocentemente en la limpia pureza de *su* hogar. Y notó la aspereza del cuello de la chaqueta en la piel y la inseguridad de sus pantalones. Salió de la habitación, cerrando la puerta. Y al cruzar el patio tuvo una momentánea vislumbre de aquellas desnudas formas nocturnas que se movían, inconscientes, en la tahona. Abajo oyó las protestas de Dick, a quien el dolor hacía proferir monótonamente una tonta blasfemia.

—Voy a buscar a Harrop —dijo en tono melancólico a su primo.

La casa del médico se hallaba a menos de cincuenta yardas; había una campanilla nocturna a la que seguía respondiendo con prontitud, aunque estaba mucho más envejecido que su padre a su edad. ¡No hacía falta bombardear la casa del médico con maíz! Mientras Samuel parlamentaba con él por una ventana, cruzaba sin cesar por su pensamiento la pregunta: «¿Y si se lo digo a la policía?».

Pero cuando, anticipándose al viejo Harrop, regresó a la tienda de Daniel, hete aquí que el policía con el que se había topado anteriormente había vuelto, haciendo su ronda, y Daniel estaba hablando con él junto a la puertecita. No había nadie más en las inmediaciones. King Street abajo, por Wedgwood Street, en la Plaza, hacia Brougham Street, nada más que los faroles de gas ardiendo con su eterna paciencia y las ciegas fachadas de las tiendas. Sólo en el segundo piso del edificio del banco, en lo alto de la Plaza, una luz se dejaba entrever misteriosamente a través de una persiana. ¡Había algún enfermo!

El policía se hallaba en estado de gran excitación nerviosa. Aquello nunca le había ocurrido antes. De los sesenta policías de Bursley, precisamente él había sido elegido por los hados para cumplir lo dispuesto por

el destino. Estaba sobresaltado.

—¿Qué es esto?, ¿qué es esto, señor Povey? —se volvió precipitadamente a Samuel—, ¿Qué es lo que me está diciendo el señor concejal Povey?

—Entre, sargento —dijo Daniel.

—Si entro —dijo a Samuel el policía—, tiene usted que ir por Wedgwood Street, señor Povey, a avisar a mi compañero. Tiene que estar en el Alto del Pato, sin duda.

Fue asombroso, una vez la piedra empezó a rodar, lo deprisa que siguió rodando. En media hora, Samuel se había separado de Daniel en la comisaría, detrás del Matadero, y corría a despertar a su mujer para que cuidara de Dick Povey hasta que fuera posible llevarlo al Hospital de Pirehill, como el viejo Harrop había decretado después de verlo.

«—¡Ah! —reflexionó en la agitación de su alma—¡De Dios no hay quien se burle!». Daniel era un buen tipo, honorable, brillante; un personaje mundano. Pero ¿y su lengua licenciosa? ¿Y su afición a las tabernas? (¿Cómo había perdido el tren de Liverpool? ¿Cómo?). Durante muchos años él, Samuel, había visto en Daniel una refutación viviente de la autenticidad de las antiguas amenazas hebreas. ¡Pero se había equivocado, después de todo! ¡De Dios no hay quien se burle! Y Samuel sintió dentro de sí un rechazo a aquella devoción estrictamente codificada de la cual, en su pensamiento, tal vez se había estado apartando.

Y al tiempo que todo esto, se sintió también oficiosamente importante cuando despertó a Constanza e intentó darle la noticia con calma y tacto. Había asistido al acontecimiento más abrumador jamás visto en la historia de la ciudad.

II

—Tu bufanda... Voy por ella —dijo Constanza— Cyril, sube corriendo y trae la bufanda de tu padre. Ya sabes en qué cajón está.

Cyril echó a correr. Era deber de todos, aquella mañana, actuar con prontitud y eficiencia.

—No necesito bufanda, gracias —dijo Samuel, tosiendo y ahogando la tos.

—¡Oh! Pero, Sam.... —protestó Constanza.

—¡Por favor, no me agobies! —dijo Samuel con fría determinación—, ¡Ya tengo bastante...! —no terminó.

Constanza suspiró al salir su marido a la calle, nervioso y presuntuoso, por la puerta lateral. Era temprano, no eran las ocho aún, y la tienda estaba todavía cerrada.

—Tu padre no podía esperar —dijo Constanza a Cyril cuando éste bajó ruidosamente con sus gruesas botas de colegial—. ¡Dámela! —fue a dejar otra vez la bufanda en su sitio.

¡Toda la casa estaba trastornada y Amy estaba todavía inválida! La existencia estaba perturbada; tenía la vaga impresión de que había mil cosas nuevas que hacer, y no obstante no se le ocurría nada que tuviese que hacer en ese momento, de modo que se ocupó de la bufanda. Antes de que reapareciera ya Cyril se había ido al colegio, él, que habitualmente se rezagaba. La verdad era que no pudo contener los deseos de contar lo sucedido aquella noche, y en especial el hecho de que había sido él el primero en oír las llamadas del asesino en los cristales de la ventana. Había que dar a todo el mundo aquella urgente noticia, como preliminar a la conmoción que aguardaba a toda la escuela; Cyril había salido, apenas cinco minutos después que su padre, en busca de un confidente digno y que supiera apreciarlo.

En la Plaza de San Lucas había una muchedumbre de lo menos doscientas personas, de pie e inmóviles en el barro novembrino. El cuerpo de la señora de Daniel Povey había sido trasladado ya al Hotel del Tigre; el joven Dick Povey iba de camino, en un carricoche cubierto, al Hospital de Pirehill, al otro lado de Knype. La tienda del crimen estaba cerrada, así como los postigos de las ventanas altas de la casa. No se veía nada en absoluto, ni siquiera un policía. No obstante, la multitud contemplaba con obstinada atención el fatídico

edificio de Bulton Terrace. Hipnotizada por aquel rostro de cal y canto, había olvidado al parecer todos los lazos terrenales y, sin pensar en el desayuno *y* en la subsistencia, estaba decidida a contemplar fijamente la casa hasta que se cayera o entregara su secreto. La mayor parte de los individuos que la componían no llevaban abrigo ni sombrero, pero mantenían el calor con una bufanda al cuello y a fuerza de meter los dedos en el último rincón de los bolsillos. Luego levantaban lentamente una pierna después de la otra. Algunos mirones de endeble determinación se destacaban de cuando en cuando de la masa y se alejaban furtivamente, avergonzados de su inconstancia. Pero llegaban refuerzos continuamente. Y a estos recién llegados había que repetirles una y otra vez todo lo que ya sabían por las habladurías: las mismas preguntas, las mismas respuestas, las mismas exclamaciones, la misma proverbial filosofía, las mismas profecías reaparecían en todas partes en la Plaza con asombrosa insistencia. Había hombres bien vestidos conversando con simples holgazanes profesionales: pues aquella sensación gloriosa y sin precedentes, cuya singularidad se tornaba a cada momento más imponente, ponía de manifiesto la fraternidad esencial de la humanidad. Todos tenían la impresión de que no era ni domingo ni día laborable sino una especie de octavo día de la semana. Sin embargo, en el vecino mercado cubierto de San Lucas, los vendedores estaban preparando sus tenderetes igual que si fuese sábado, igual que si un concejal de la villa no hubiese asesinado a su mujer... ¡por fin! Se aseveró y se volvió a aseverar hasta el infinito que de la panadería de Povey se había hecho cargo Brindley, el segundo mejor panadero y repostero, que tenía un puesto en el mercado. Y se afirmó, cual una verdad filosófica, y se volvió a afirmar hasta el infinito que no tenía ningún sentido echar a perder alimentos de calidad.

La aparición de Samuel agitó a la multitud. Pero Samuel continuó plaza arriba con expresión absorta; tal vez se creía, sumido en la extrema gravedad de sus preocupaciones, que estaba atravesando una plaza desierta. Apresuradamente dejó atrás el banco y bajó Turnhill Road, hasta la residencia privada de «Lawton el Joven», hijo del difunto «Abogado Lawton». Lawton el Joven seguía la profesión de su padre; era, como había sido su padre, el abogado de más éxito de la ciudad (aunque entre sus distinguidos rivales tenía fama de estúpido), pero la costumbre de llamar a los hombres por sus ocupaciones se había extinguido con los tranvías a tracción animal. Samuel encontró al joven Lawton desayunando y luego lo llevó en la calesa de Lawton a la comisaría, donde la llegada de ambos electrificó a una muchedumbre casi tan grande como la de la Plaza de San Lucas. Después fueron juntos a Hanbridge para dar instrucciones informales al abogado que iba a actuar ante el tribunal; y Samuel, a quien no se permitió estar presente en la primera parte de la entrevista entre el defensor y dicho abogado, se vio humillado ante la pomposidad de la etiqueta legal.

A Samuel le pareció un juego. Todo el barullo de la policía, las celdas y las formalidades le parecía insincero. El caso de su primo no era como cualquier otro caso, y, si bien las formalidades eran quizá necesarias, era notablemente absurdo fingir que era como cualquier otro caso. En qué sentido era diferente de los demás casos es algo que Samuel no entró a indagar críticamente. Pensaba que, en el coloquio entre ambos, el joven Lawton era un engreído y Daniel demasiado humilde, y se esforzó en indicar, con la dignidad de su propia conducta, que en su opinión no se habían marcado como es debido las relativas pautas. No podía entender la actitud de Daniel, pues le faltaba imaginación para hacerse cargo de lo que éste había pasado. Al fin y al cabo, Daniel no era un asesino; la muerte de su mujer se había debido a un accidente, había sido un simple percance.

Pero en la atestada y apestosa sala del ayuntamiento Samuel empezó a sentir escrúpulos. Sucedió que el juez de paz tenía sesión aquella mañana en Bursley. Estaba solo, ya que ninguno de los jueces del distrito estuvo dispuesto a ocupar el banco estando un concejal de la villa en el banquillo de los acusados. El juez de paz, nombrado hacía poco, era un joven del sur del condado, y para él un concejal de Bursley no era más de lo que es un pequeño comerciante para un hombre a la moda. Poseía un entusiasmo juvenil por la majestad y la imparcialidad de la justicia inglesa y se comportaba como si toda la responsabilidad por la seguridad de ese vasto edificio descansara sobre sus hombros. Él y el defensor de Hanbridge habían tenido en Cambridge una pelea histórica y la conducta de cada uno para con el otro fue para los vulgares una lección del arte de la cortesía fría y consumada. El joven Lawton, que había ido a Oxford, despreciaba secretamente a ambos, pero, como llevaba la defensa, no podía, por supuesto, aumentar la elocuencia, cosa que le causaba pesadumbre. Los tres constituían la aristocracia de la sala; lo sabían; Samuel Povey lo sabía; todo el mundo lo sabía y lo percibía. El defensor puso un inocuo celo en el cumplimiento de sus obligaciones; aludió en términos adecuados a la buena fama de Daniel y a su elevada posición en la ciudad, pero nada pudo ocultar el hecho de que también para él su cliente era un pequeño comerciante acusado de simple asesinato. Naturalmente, el juez de paz estaba obligado a demostrar que ante la ley todos los hombres son iguales, el concejal de la villa y el vulgar borrachín, y lo consiguió. El policía presentó su testimonio; el inspector juró lo que había dicho Daniel Povey cuando fue acusado. La vista se desarrolló tan rápidamente y sin tropiezos que no pareció ser sino un rito vacío, con Daniel como un maniquí. El juez de paz creó maravillosamente la ilusión de que para él un asesinato cometido por un concejal de la Plaza de San Lucas era un asunto totalmente cotidiano. La libertad bajo fianza era inconcebible y, al ser incapaz el defensor de indicar ninguna razón para que el juez de paz la concediese —en realidad no había razón alguna—, se dictó auto de procesamiento en el Tribunal Superior de Staffordhsire contra Daniel Povey. El juez de paz pasó de inmediato a considerar un supuesto delito contra las

Leyes de Fábricas cometido por una gran empresa local de alfareros. El joven juez de paz había equivocado su vocación. Con su calma acerada, su imperturbable distanciamiento de la débil humanidad, debería haber sido general de la orden de los jesuitas.

A Daniel lo sacaron de la sala: no salió él, lo sacaron dos agentes con la cabeza descubierta. Samuel quería hablar con él pero no pudo. Después, Samuel esperó en el porche del ayuntamiento y Daniel salió por un pasillo, aún guardado por los dos policías, ahora con sus cascos. Al pie del ancho tramo de escalones, por donde subían quienes iban a los bailes de abono, había una densa muchedumbre, contenida por otros policías; más allá de la multitud, otro carromato negro. Y a Daniel —para su primo una especie de Cristo entre los ladrones— lo hicieron pasar con toda rapidez ante los privilegiados haraganes del pasillo y bajar los anchos peldaños. Una oleada de rumor agitó a la multitud. Algunos desaliñados vagos e inútiles vestidos de pana saltaron como tigres y los policías los hicieron retroceder con furia. Y Daniel y sus guardianes pasaron como balas por aquel pequeño callejón viviente. ¡Deprisa! ¡Deprisa! Pues un cautivo es más sagrado que un mesías. ¡La ley lo tiene bajo su responsabilidad! Y, como en una hazaña de prestidigitación, Daniel desapareció en la negrura del carromato. Se cerró una puerta con un fuerte golpe triunfal y chasqueó un látigo. Se había logrado eludir a la multitud. Fue como si la multitud hubiese pedido la sangre de Daniel y los fieles agentes lo hubieran salvado de su concupiscencia.

Sí, Samuel tenía escrúpulos. Tenía el estómago revuelto.

Pasó junto a él el superintendente de policía, hombre de edad, acompañado del párroco, también hombre de edad. El párroco era amigo de Daniel. Nunca había hablado con Samuel, que no pertenecía a la iglesia anglicana, pero entonces se dirigió a él; le estrechó la mano.

—¡Ah, señor Povey! —exclamó afligido.

—Temo..., temo que es grave —tartamudeó Samuel. Detestaba admitir que era grave, pero las palabras le salieron solas.

Miró al superintendente de policía, esperando que éste le asegurara que no era grave, pero el superintendente se limitó a levantar el mentón, adornado con barba blanca, sin decir nada. El párroco movió la cabeza y se secó una lágrima senil.

Después de otra conversación con el joven Lawton, Samuel, en nombre de Daniel, abandonó su actitud de hombre recto al que le ha ocurrido un simple percance y que está decidido, con el altivo orgullo de la inocencia, a ceder a todos los caprichos de la ley, a ser más papista que el papa. Cayó en la cuenta de que con la ley hay que luchar con sus propias armas, de que no hay que renunciar a ninguna ventaja y hay que aprovechar todas las posibles. Estaba verdaderamente sorprendido de que hubiera podido adoptar semejante actitud. Ahora tenía los ojos abiertos y veía las cosas tal cual eran.

Volvió a casa cruzando una Plaza que estaba más interesada que nunca en la fachada de la casa de su primo. Empezaba a venir gente de Hanbridge, Knype, Longshaw, Turnhill y pueblos como Moorthorne para contemplar aquella fachada. Y se estaba pregonando la cuarta edición de la *Señal,* que contenía un informe completo de lo que se habían comunicado el juez de paz y el defensor.

En su tienda halló a los clientes tan absorbidos en las trivialidades de sus compras como si nada hubiera sucedido. Se sintió escandalizado y le molestó su insensibilidad.

—Estoy demasiado ocupado ahora —dijo en tono cortante a alguien que lo abordó.

—¡Sam! —lo llamó su esposa en voz baja. Estaba detrás de la caja.

—¿Qué pasa? —estaba dispuesto a aplastar, sobre todo a aplastar el parloteo indiscreto en la tienda. Pensó que Constanza iba a dar rienda suelta de inmediato a su curiosidad mujeril.

—El señor Huntback te está esperando en la sala —dijo Constanza.

—¿El señor Huntback?

—Sí, de Longshaw —susurró—. Es un primo de la señora Povey. Ha venido a ocuparse del funeral y lo demás, la..., la investigación, me imagino.

Samuel hizo una pausa.

—¡Oh, ha venido! —dijo en tono desafiante— Bien; iré a verlo. Si quiere verme, iré a verlo.

Aquella tarde Constanza conoció todo el encono que anidaba en el corazón de Samuel contra la memoria de la muerta, cuyos defectos habían llevado a Daniel Povey a la cárcel de Stafford y a Dick al hospital de Pirehill. Una y otra vez, los días siguientes, aludió a las condiciones de inmunda incomodidad que había descubierto en la casa de Daniel. Alimentaba un sentimiento de hostilidad contra todos los parientes de ella; cuando, después de la investigación, en la cual él dio un testimonio lleno de resentimiento, fue enterrada, dejó escapar un suspiro de alivio y dijo: «¡Bueno, ya nos la hemos quitado de en medio!». De allí en adelante tenía la misión, religiosa en su solemne intensidad, de defender y salvar a Daniel. Tomó sobre sí dicha empresa, entregándose por completo a ella, descuidando el negocio y su salud. Vivía únicamente para el juicio de Daniel, gastando el dinero a manos llenas en su preparación. No pensaba en otra cosa ni hablaba de otra cosa. Aquel asunto era su única preocupación. Y conforme pasaban las semanas estaba más seguro del éxito, más seguro de que volvería triunfante a Bursley con Daniel después del juicio. Estaba convencido de que era imposible que a Daniel «le sucediera algo»; las circunstancias eran demasiado claras y abrumadoras en favor de Daniel para ello.

Cuando Brindley, el segundo panadero y confitero, hizo una oferta por el establecimiento de Daniel como negocio en marcha, se indignó en un principio. Después, Constanza, el abogado y Daniel (a quien veía en todas las ocasiones que se le permitía) lo persuadieron de que si no se llegaba a un acuerdo, y pronto, el negocio perdería todo su valor, y consintió en nombre de Daniel en un arreglo temporal conforme al cual Brindley reabriría la tienda y la llevaría en determinadas condiciones hasta que Daniel recobrara la libertad hacia fines de enero. No quiso escuchar la quejumbrosa insistencia de Daniel, que decía que no quería volver a ser visto en Bursley. La rechazaba con desdén. Protestaba furiosamente diciendo que la ciudad rebosaba simpatía por Daniel, y era cierto. Se convirtió en el ángel de la guarda de Daniel, rescatándolo de la debilidad y la apatía del propio Daniel. De hecho se convirtió en Daniel.

Una mañana se levantó el cierre metálico de la tienda y Brindley, henchido de importancia por dirigir dos establecimientos, entraba y salía muy ufano bajo la muestra de Daniel. Y el comercio de pan, pasteles y harina se reanudó. Aparentemente, el mar del tiempo había cubierto a Daniel y todo lo que fuera suyo: su mujer estaba bajo tierra, Dick permanecía en Pirehill, incapaz de estar de pie, y Daniel estaba encerrado. Aparentemente, en el correr de la vida en la Plaza, Daniel había sido olvidado. ¡Pero no lo estaba en el corazón de Samuel! Allí, ante el altar erigido al mártir, ardía perenne la sagrada llama de una nueva fe. Samuel, en su mediana edad de cabello encaneciente, había heredado la eterna juventud de un apóstol.

III

La oscura mañana de invierno que Samuel partió para asistir al juicio en el tribunal superior, Constanza no le preguntó su opinión en cuanto a cómo debía protegerse de las inclemencias del tiempo. Alineó en silencio diversas prendas interiores y, junto al fuego, que Constanza había mantenido bien vivo durante días en el dormitorio, Samuel se puso en silencio aquellas prendas especiales. Encima, con un cuidado singularmente minucioso, vistió su mejor traje. No se pronunció una palabra. Constanza y él no estaban distanciados, pero las relaciones entre ellos se hallaban en un estado de nerviosismo febril. Samuel llevaba semanas con un catarro en su plano pecho y nada que Constanza hubiera podido inventar había conseguido expulsarlo. Unos pocos días en cama o, por lo menos, una misma habitación a temperatura constante seguramente habrían logrado la curación. No hubo manera, sin embargo, de que Samuel se quedase en una habitación, ni en casa, ni siquiera en Bursley. Se llevaba su lacerante tos a Stafford en gélidos trenes. No quería atenerse a razones; sencillamente, no escuchaba; vivía en un sueño. Después de Navidad acaeció una crisis. Constanza se desesperó. Era una batalla entre su voluntad y la de él que se libró cierta noche que Constanza, haciendo acopio de fuerzas, insistió de improviso en que no debía salir más hasta que se hubiese curado. En la lucha, Constanza era casi imposible de reconocer. Cedió deliberadamente a la histeria, dejó de ser blanda y gentil; le dijo cosas duras, lanzadas como si fuesen vitriolo; gritó como una arpía vulgar. Parecía casi increíble que Constanza hubiese llegado tan lejos, pero así fue. Le acusó entre sollozos de poner a su primo por encima de su mujer y de su hijo, sin importarle si se quedaba viuda como consecuencia de aquella obstinación. Y acabó clamando con pasión que era como hablar a un poste. Igual le hubiera dado hablar a un poste. Samuel respondió fría y calmosamente. Le dijo que su consternación no servía de nada, ya que él estaba haciendo lo que creía conveniente. Fue una escena extraordinaria y totalmente única en los anales de la pareja. Constanza fue vencida. Aceptó la derrota, dominando poco a poco los sollozos y cambiando su tono por el de los vencidos. Le besó, inclinando la cerviz. Y él la besó a ella con expresión grave.

De allí en adelante conoció de una manera práctica el espantoso y humillante suplicio que lo inevitable

puede contener cuando es preciso vivir con ello. Su marido estaba arriesgando su vida; estaba absolutamente convencida de ello y no podía hacer nada; había llegado a los cimientos del carácter de Samuel. Pensaba que en aquellos momentos tenía en casa un loco al que no se podía tratar con arreglo a los principios habituales. La tensión constante la envejeció. Su único alivio era hablar con Cyril. Le hablaba sin reserva; las palabras «tu padre» estaban siempre en su quejosa boca. Sí; había cambiado mucho. Con frecuencia lloraba cuando estaba sola.

No obstante, muchas veces olvidaba que estaba derrotada. No sabía nada de guerra honorable. Estaba siempre empezando de nuevo, luchando bajo bandera de tregua, con lo que constituía un enemigo muy inoportuno. Samuel se veía obligado, al tiempo que reforzaba el punto principal, a transigir en cuestiones menores. Ella también podía ser formidable; cuando ponía los labios de cierta manera y sus ojos fulguraban se habría puesto cuarenta bufandas si se lo hubiese mandado. Así pues, fue ella la que dispuso todos los detalles del viaje supremo a Stafford. Samuel iría en coche hasta Knype para evitar los rigores de la línea circular de Bursley y la espera en fríos andenes. En Knype tomaría el expreso y viajaría en primera.

Después de vestirse aquella mañana a la luz de gas, tuvo conocimiento, paso a paso, de hasta dónde llegaban sus elaborados preparativos. El desayuno era especial y había de comérselo todo. Luego vino el coche y vio que Amy metía en él ladrillos calientes. La propia Constanza puso chanclos sobre sus botas, no porque hubiese humedad sino porque el caucho mantiene los pies calientes. La propia Constanza le puso la bufanda al cuello, le desabrochó el chaleco y colocó una pieza adicional de franela debajo de la pechera. La propia Constanza calentó los guantes de lana y lo envolvió en el abrigo más amplio que tenía Samuel.

Luego, Samuel vio que Cyril se preparaba para salir.

—¿Dónde vas? —le preguntó.

—Va contigo hasta Knype —dijo Constanza resueltamente—. Te acompañará al tren y luego volverá en el coche.

Le soltó de golpe aquella indignidad. Su mirada era desafiante. Cyril los contempló alternativamente con aire de tímida bravuconería. Samuel hubo de ceder.

De este modo, en medio de la oscuridad invernal —pues aún no había amanecido—, partió Samuel para el juicio, acompañado por su hijo. El eco de su tos atroz, desde el coche, fue lo último que oyó Constanza.

Constanza pasó gran parte del día sentada en el «rincón de la señorita Insull», en la tienda. Veinte años antes aquel rincón era suyo. Pero ahora, en vez de por grandes cajas de sombreros envueltas en papel marrón, estaba aislado del resto del mostrador por un rico biombo de caoba y cristal esmerilado, y dentro de aquel espacio cerrado se había dispuesto todo lo necesario para la actividad de la señorita Insull. Sin embargo seguía siendo la parte más fría de toda la tienda, como testimoniaban los dedos de la señorita Insull. Constanza se instaló allí más por un deseo de hacer algo, de inmiscuirse en algo, que por una necesidad de supervisar la tienda, aunque le había dicho a Samuel que estaría pendiente de ella. La señorita Insull, cuyo trono fue usurpado, tuvo que sentarse junto a la estufa con otros seres menos importantes; aquello no le agradó y sus subalternas pagaron las consecuencias.

Fue un día muy largo. Hacia la hora del té, justo antes de que volviera Cyril del colegio, apareció inesperadamente el señor Critchlow. Es decir, su llegada fue menos sorprendente para la señorita Insull y el resto del personal que para Constanza, pues últimamente había adquirido la costumbre de asomarse por allí a la hora del té a charlar con la señorita Insull. El señor Critchlow seguía desafiando al paso del tiempo. Conservaba perfectamente erguida su figura larga y delgada. Sus rasgos no se habían alterado. Su cabello y su barba no podían ser más blancos que en años anteriores. Llevaba su largo delantal blanco y encima un grueso chaquetón marinero. En sus largos y nudosos dedos llevaba un ejemplar de la *Señal.*

Era evidente que no esperaba encontrar el rincón ocupado por Constanza. Ésta se hallaba cosiendo.

—¡Así que es usted! —dijo con su voz desagradable y rasposa, sin echar siquiera una mirada a la señorita Insull. Se había ganado la reputación de ser el viejo más descortés de Bursley. Pero su conducta habitual expresaba más bien falta de deferencia que descortesía. Eran unos modales que decían: «Tienen ustedes que aceptarme como soy. Seré egoísta, duro, mezquino, pero al que no le guste, que se aguante. Me es indiferente».

Puso un codo encima del bombo y le enseñó la *Señal.*

—¡Señor Critchlow! —exclamó Constanza con cortedad; Samuel le había contagiado su desagrado.

—¡Ya ha empezado! —observó él con misterioso regocijo.

—¿Sí? —inquirió Constanza ansiosamente—, ¿Está ya en el periódico?

Estaba mucho más preocupada por la salud de su marido que por el juicio de Daniel Povey por asesinato, pero su interés en el juicio era por supuesto muy grande. Y la noticia de que ya había comenzado la hizo estremecer.

—¡Sí! —respondió el señor Critchlow—, ¿No ha oído al chico de la *Señal* vociferando por toda la Plaza hace un momento?

—No —respondió Constanza. Para ella no existían los periódicos. Jamás se le había ocurrido abrir uno, jamás había sentido una curiosidad que no pudiera satisfacer, si es que era posible satisfacerla, sin la poderosa ayuda de la Prensa. Y ni siquiera aquel día se le había pasado por la cabeza que valiera la pena abrir la *Señal.*

—Sí —repitió el señor Critchlow—. Según parece empezó a las dos o así—. Prestó atención por un momento a un ruidoso surtidor de gas y lo bajó cuidadosamente.

—¿Qué dice?

—¡Todavía nada! —dijo el señor Critchlow. Leyeron unas pocas frases cortas, debajo de los grandes titulares, en las cuales se describía el inicio formal del juicio de Daniel Povey por el asesinato de su esposa—. ¡Hay quien dice que el gran jurado modificaría la acusación, o algo así! —dejó escapar una risa forzada de condescendencia con aquel extremado absurdo—, ¡Ah! —añadió pensativamente, volviendo la cabeza a ver si las dependientas estaban escuchando. Así era. Habría sido demasiado, en un día como aquél, esperar una estricta observancia de la etiqueta de la tienda.

Constanza había oído hablar mucho de los grandes jurados recientemente, pero no entendía nada ni trataba de entender.

—Me alegro de que haya empezado tan pronto —dijo—. ¡En cierto modo me alegro! Temía que Sam tuviera que pasar días en Stafford. ¿Cree usted que durará mucho?

—¡Qué va! —dijo concluyentemente el señor Critchlow—. No hay nada que obligue a alargarlo.

Después se produjo un silencio interrumpido por los sonidos de la costura.

En realidad, Constanza habría preferido no conversar con el anciano, pero el deseo de tranquilizarse, de calmar sus propios temores, la forzaba a hablar, aunque sabía bien que el señor Critchlow era precisamente la última persona de la ciudad que prestaría ayuda moral si pensara que se necesitaba.

—¡Espero que todo vaya bien! —murmuró.

—¡Todo irá bien! —dijo él alegremente— Todo irá bien. Sólo que para Daniel irá mal.

—¿Qué quiere decir, señor Critchlow? —protestó Constanza. Pensó que no había nada que pudiera despertar la piedad en aquel corazón, ni siquiera una tragedia como la de Daniel. Se mordió los labios, disgustada por haber hablado.

—Bueno —dijo en voz alta, dirigiéndose sin rebozo a las muchachas que estaban alrededor de la estufa tanto como a Constanza—, ¡Con menudos razonamientos me he topado este año nuevo, vaya que sí! Hay quien dice que Dan no pretendía hacerlo. Puede ser. Pero si eso es una razón para no colgar a una persona, se acabó la pena de muerte en este país. «¡Que no pretendía!» ¡Pues no hay pocos que «no pretendían»! Luego me dicen que era una mujer aficionada a callejear y no cuidaba de su casa, y que estaba tanto tiempo borracha como serena. No hace ninguna falta que me digan eso. Si el estrangulamiento es un castigo justo para una esposa que se pasa el tiempo bebiendo coñac en vez de barrer suelos y airear sábanas, entonces Dan está salvado. Pero no me imagino al juez Lindley diciéndole al jurado semejante cosa. ¡Yo he sido miembro de un jurado con el juez Lindley —más de una vez— y no me lo imagino, la verdad! —hizo una pausa con la boca abierta—. En cuanto a todos esos señorones —prosiguió—, incluyendo al párroco, que han ido a Stafford a jurar sobre la Biblia que la reputación de Dan es inmejorable..., si pudieran jurar que Dan no estuvo en su casa en toda aquella noche; si pudieran jurar que estaba en Jericó, habría tenido algún sentido que fueran. Pero tal como están las cosas, mejor hubieran hecho en quedarse en casa y ocuparse de sus asuntos. ¡Válgame Dios! ¡Sam quería que fuera *yo!*

Se volvió a reír en la cara de las horrorizadas y airadas mujeres.

—¡Me sorprende usted, señor Critchlow! ¡De verdad que me sorprende! —exclamó Constanza.

Y las dependientas la apoyaron con vagos sonidos inarticulados. La señorita Insull se levantó y hurgó en la estufa. Todas las almas del establecimiento estaban lealmente convencidas de que Daniel Povey sería absuelto; albergar dudas acerca de esta certeza era un crimen odioso. La convicción no entraba en el dominio de la razón, era un acto de fe; los argumentos en contra se limitaban a inquietarla sin disminuirla en lo más mínimo.

—¡Sí, es posible! —coincidió el señor Critchlow alegremente. Estaba muy contento.

Justo al darse la vuelta arrastrando los pies para salir de la tienda entró Cyril.

—Buenas tardes, señor Critchlow —dijo con tímida cortesía.

El señor Critchlow le dirigió una dura mirada y dio varios rápidos cabezazos, como diciendo: «¡Aquí hay otro tonto en ciernes! ¡Así es como una generación sucede a otra!». No respondió al saludo y se marchó.

Cyril corrió hacia el rincón en que estaba su madre, soltando la bolsa en la escalera del entresuelo al pasar junto a ella. Se quitó la gorra, dio un beso a Constanza y ésta le desabrochó el abrigo con sus frías manos.

—¿Qué quería el viejo Matusalén?

—¡Calla! —le regañó Constanza con suavidad—. Vino a decirme que el juicio había empezado.

—¡Ah, yo ya lo sabía! Un chico compró el periódico y lo vi. Oye, mamá, ¿saldrá papá en el periódico? —Y luego, en un tono diferente—: Oye, mamá, ¿qué hay para merendar?

Cuando su estómago se hubo enterado con exactitud de lo que había para merendar, el muchacho empezó a mostrar una enorme y locuaz curiosidad por el juicio. No hubo manera de que se pusiera a hacer los deberes.

—No sirve de nada, mamá —dijo— No puedo.

Volvieron juntos a la tienda; Cyril se acercaba a la puerta a cada momento por si se oía a algún vendedor de periódicos. Luego se le ocurrió que lo mismo estaban pregonando la edición especial de la *Señal* en la plaza del mercado, delante del ayuntamiento, descuidando la Plaza de San Lucas. Y no se quedó satisfecho más que yendo a ver. Salió sin abrigo, prometiendo volver enseguida. La tienda esperaba sumida en una extraña ansiedad. Cyril, moviéndose de acá para allá, había creado una atmósfera de tensa expectación. Parecía ahora como si toda la ciudad estuviese con el corazón palpitante, temiendo las noticias y sin embargo ardiendo por recibirlas. Constanza se imaginaba Stafford, donde no había estado nunca, y un tribunal, que no había visto nunca, y a su marido y a Daniel allí. Y aguardaba.

Entró Cyril corriendo.

—¡No! —anunció sin aliento—. Todavía nada.

—No te enfríes, ahora que estás acalorado —le aconsejó Constanza.

Pero él se quedó junto a la puerta. Al poco, volvió a salir corriendo.

Y unos quince segundos después de salir él se oyó a lo lejos el grito estridente de un rapaz de la *Señal,* débil e indistinto al principio, después más fuerte y claro.

—¡Hay periódico! —dijo la aprendiza.

—¡Sssh! —siseó Constanza, escuchando.

—¡Sssh! —siseó la señorita Insull como un eco.

—¡Sí que hay! —dijo Constanza—. Señorita Insull, salga a traerlo. Aquí tiene medio penique.

El medio penique pasó rápidamente de una mano con dedal a otra. La señorita Insull salió a toda prisa.

Volvió triunfante con el pliego, que cogió Constanza, temblorosa. Al principio no pudo encontrar el reportaje. La señorita Insull se lo señaló y ella leyó:

—«¡Conclusiones!» ¡Más abajo, más abajo! «Tras una ausencia de treinta y cinco minutos el jurado halló al preso culpable de asesinato, con recomendación de misericordia. El juez se puso el gorro negro y pronunció sentencia de muerte, diciendo que remitiría la recomendación a la jurisdicción adecuada».

Volvió Cyril.

—¡Todavía no! —estaba diciendo, cuando vio el periódico sobre el mostrador. Se quedó cabizbajo.

Mucho después de que la tienda hubiese cerrado, Constanza y Cyril esperaban en la sala la llegada del amo de la casa. Constanza estaba hundida en la mayor desesperación. No veía más que la muerte en torno suyo. Pensaba que las desgracias nunca vienen solas. ¿Por qué no llegaba Samuel? Tenía todo preparado para él, todo lo que su imaginación podía sugerirle, cosas como alimento, remedios, formas de entrar en calor. No se permitió a Amy irse a dormir por si la necesitaban. Constanza ni siquiera insinuó que Cyril se fuese a la cama. El paso de los negros y espantosos minutos se iba marcando en la repisa de la chimenea hasta que faltaban cinco para que Constanza no supiera ya qué hacer. Eran las once y veinticinco. Si a la media Samuel no había aparecido, ya no podría llegar aquella noche, a menos que el último tren de Stafford llevase un retraso inconcebible.

¡El ruido de un carruaje! Se detuvo en la puerta. Madre e hijo se pusieron en pie de un salto.

¡Sí, era Samuel! Constanza lo contempló una vez más. Y la visión de su estado físico y moral la aterró. Su hijo, grande y robusto, y Amy le ayudaron a subir la escalera. «¿Volverá a bajar esta escalera?». Aquel pensamiento atravesó el corazón de Constanza. El dolor vino y se fue en un momento, pero había sorprendido a su sereno sentido común, que era por naturaleza contrario a los temores histéricos y los despreciaba con discreción. En tanto subía jadeando la escalera, aquel lisonjero optimismo le costó un inmenso esfuerzo de voluntad. Estaba profundamente atribulada; le parecía que por todas partes se acercaban lentamente a ella grandes desastres.

¿Debía avisar al médico? No. Hacerlo no sería más que una concesión al instinto del pánico. Sabía exactamente lo que le pasaba a Samuel: una mala tos persistentemente descuidada, nada más. Como tantas veces había dicho a quienes preguntaban: «Nunca ha estado lo que se dice enfermo». No obstante, cuando lo metió en la cama y lo arropó, ¡cuán débil y frágil parecía! Y estaba tan agotado que ni siquiera quiso hablar del juicio.

—¡Si no está mejor mañana sí que avisaré al médico! —se dijo. En cuanto a que se levantara, juró que le haría quedarse en cama por la fuerza si era necesario.

IV

A la mañana siguiente se sintió contenta y orgullosa de no haber cedido a un susto, pues él estaba extraña y visiblemente mejor. Había dormido profundamente; ella había podido dormir un poco. ¡Era cierto que Daniel había sido condenado a muerte! Abandonando a Daniel a su destino, ella era consciente de la alegría que saltaba en su corazón. ¡Qué absurdo fue preguntarse si volvería a bajar aquella escalera!

De la tienda, que había olvidado por completo, llegó en el transcurso de la mañana el mensaje de que había venido el señor Lawton a ver al señor Povey. Ya Samuel había querido levantarse, pero Constanza se lo prohibió en el tono de una mujer peligrosa y Samuel había sido muy razonable. Entonces dijo que había que invitar a subir al señor Lawton. Ella recorrió la habitación con la mirada. Estaba «hecha»; era impecable como habitación de un enfermo. Accedió a que entrase en ella aquel hombre de otra esfera; tras un minuto preliminar los dejó solos. La visita del joven Lawton era una prueba espectacular de la importancia de Samuel y de la importancia del asunto. La augusta ocasión exigía etiqueta, y la etiqueta decía que una esposa debe separarse de su marido cuando tiene que ocuparse de asuntos que están fuera de la comprensión de una esposa.

En aquella entrevista tomó forma la idea de una petición al ministro del Interior; antes de terminar el día ya se había difundido por la ciudad y por las Cinco Ciudades y aparecido en la *Señal.* La *Señal* se refería a Daniel Povey como «el condenado». Y esta expresión despertó en toda la región una indignada agitación en favor del indulto. La región cayó en la cuenta de que un concejal, un personaje, un honrado comerciante de intachable reputación, estaba encerrado solo en una pequeña celda en Stafford, aguardando ser colgado por el

cuello hasta que muriese. La región determinó que aquello no debía ni podía suceder. «¡Cómo! Daniel Povey había sido presidente de la Sociedad Bursleyana para la Represión de la Delincuencia, una sociedad que se reunía todos los años a comer y beber y cuyos miembros se llamaban humorísticamente unos a otros «delincuentes»! ¡Imposible, monstruoso, que un ex presidente de los «Delincuentes» fuera un criminal sentenciado!

Sin embargo, no había nada que temer. Ningún ministro del Interior se atrevería a ir contra la recomendación del jurado y el deseo expreso de toda la región. Además, el sobrino del ministro del Interior era diputado por la circunscripción de Knype. Desde luego, el veredicto de culpabilidad había sido inevitable. A la sazón todo el mundo lo reconocía. Hasta Samuel y los más ardientes partidarios de Daniel Povey lo reconocían. Hablaban como si siempre lo hubiesen previsto, en palmaria contradicción con lo que habían dicho el mismo día anterior. Sin sensación alguna de incongruencia ni vergüenza adoptaron una postura enteramente nueva. La estructura de la fe ciega se había deshecho una vez más ante el asalto de las realidades; unas verdades insanas y poco patrióticas, afirmar las cuales habría supuesto el ostracismo veinticuatro horas antes, se convirtieron de repente en lugares comunes en la Plaza y en el mercado.

La celeridad era necesaria en el asunto de la petición, ya que el condenado sólo tenía tres domingos. Pero hubo retraso en el comienzo porque ni el joven Lawton ni ninguno de sus colegas conocía la fórmula adecuada para solicitar al ministro del Interior la absolución de un criminal condenado a muerte. Que se recordara, en la región no se había presentado ninguna solicitud de este tipo. Y al principio el joven Lawton no consiguió ver ni copiar una petición de este tipo en las Cinco Ciudades ni fuera de ellas. Por supuesto tenía que existir una fórmula adecuada; por supuesto no se podía emplear ninguna otra. Nadie tuvo la osadía de sugerir que el joven Lawton iniciase la solicitud: «Al muy noble marqués de Welwyn, Consejero del Rey, ¿tendría a bien Su Señoría...?», y la terminase «Y sus solicitantes le profesarán eterna gratitud», e insertase entre estas frases una sencilla súplica de absolución, con una exposición de motivos. ¡No! Había que encontrar la fórmula consagrada por la tradición. Y se encontró cuando Daniel estaba día y medio más cerca de la muerte. Un abogado de Alnwick tenía el borrador de una petición que había conseguido para un asesino de Northumberland veinte años de trabajos forzados en lugar de una muerte repentina; a solicitud del joven Lawton, se la envió. Los promotores fundamentales de la petición pensaron que era como si Daniel estuviese salvado. Se imprimieron cientos de formularios para firmar y se pusieron dichos formularios, junto con copias de la petición, en los mostradores de todas las tiendas principales, no solamente en Bursley sino también en las otras villas. Se encontraban también en las oficinas de la *Señal,* en las salas de espera de las estaciones y en las diversas salas de lectura; el segundo de los tres domingos de Daniel se expusieron en los pórticos de las iglesias y capillas. Los cuidadores de las capillas y los sacristanes acudían a Samuel a preguntarle, con pesada inercia de su estupidez: «¿Y las plumas y la tinta, señor?». Aquellos empleados tenían un aire de estar perturbando audazmente una sacrosanta rutina de siglos para otorgar un favor.

Samuel seguía mejorando. La tos le sacudía menos y tenía más apetito. Constanza le permitió establecerse en el salón, que estaba cerca del dormitorio y cuyo guardafuegos era especialmente eficiente. Desde allí, con un abrigo viejo, dirigió el vasto asunto de la petición, que crecía diariamente hasta alcanzar proporciones aún más vastas. Samuel soñaba con obtener veinte mil firmas. Cada hoja contenía veinte; varias veces al día contaba las hojas. Una vez se les acabaron las hojas y la propia Constanza tuvo que ir corriendo a la imprenta a encargar más. Samuel se puso fuera de sí por el descuido de los impresores. Ofreció a Cyril seis peniques por cada hoja de firmas que consiguiera. Al principio, Cyril era demasiado tímido para solicitar votos, pero su padre le hizo sonrojarse y en pocas horas hacía campaña con entusiasmo. Un día entero faltó al colegio para dedicarse a ella. En conjunto ganaba más de quince chelines, de forma totalmente honrada salvo en que tenía un compañero para falsificar un par de firmas con direcciones que faltasen al final de una última hoja, recompensándolo generosamente con seis peniques, el valor de la hoja entera.

Cuando Samuel hubo recibido mil hojas con veinte mil firmas se propuso llegar a las veinticinco mil. Y anunció también su firme intención de acompañar al joven Lawton a Londres a presentar la solicitud. Ésta se había convertido en una de las más notables de los tiempos modernos. Así lo dijo la *Señal.* La *Señal* ofrecía diaria información sobre su progreso, que era asombroso. Había calles en las que habían firmado todos los residentes. Las primeras hojas se habían reservado para firmas de diputados, ministros de la religión, dignatarios cívicos, jueces de paz, etc. Dichas hojas se llenaron noblemente. El anciano párroco de Bursley firmó el primero; después de él, el alcalde de Bursley, como correspondía; luego varios diputados.

Samuel salió del salón. Fue a la sala y después a la tienda; no hubo ninguna mala consecuencia. Su tos estaba casi curada, aunque no del todo. El tiempo era extraordinariamente benigno para la estación. Repetía que tenía que ir a Londres acompañando a la petición, y fue; Constanza no pudo oponerse legítimamente al viaje. También ella estaba un poco embriagada con el asunto de la petición. Ésta pesaba mucho, más de cincuenta kilos. La firma que la coronó, la del diputado por Knype, se obtuvo como es debido en Londres; la única decepción de Samuel fue que sus esperanzas de llegar a las veinticinco mil firmas no se vieron

cumplidas por muy poco. Las que faltaban se habrían podido conseguir si no hubiera habido tanta premura de tiempo. Volvió de Londres hecho un hombre notable, lleno de seguridad en sí mismo, pero la tos había vuelto a empeorar.

Su confianza en el poder de la opinión pública y en la virtud intrínseca de la justicia habría resultado acertada de no ser porque el ministro del Interior era uno de esos funcionarios humanos. El marqués de Welwyn era famoso en todos los estratos de las clases gobernantes por sus instintos humanos, que estaban siempre luchando con su sentido del deber. Desgraciadamente, su sentido del deber, que había heredado de varios siglos de antepasados, hacía estragos entre sus instintos humanos en casi todas las ocasiones de conflicto. Se decía que padecía horriblemente a causa de ello. Otros también padecían, pues nunca se supo que aconsejara la remisión de una sentencia de flagelación. Algunas penas de muerte había conmutado, pero no conmutó la de Daniel Povey. No podía permitirse que le influyera una oleada de sentimiento popular, ni mucho menos la firma de su propio sobrino. Concedió al caso el paciente e implacable examen que concedía a todos los casos. Se pasó una noche sin dormir tratando de descubrir una razón para ceder a sus instintos humanos, pero sin éxito. Como observaba el juez Lindley en su informe confidencial, los únicos argumentos en favor de Daniel eran la provocación y su excelente reputación anterior, y no eran argumentos de ninguna clase. La provocación era totalmente inadecuada y lo de la excelente reputación anterior era absurdo, pues no tenía nada que ver con el asunto. Así pues, una vez más, los instintos humanos del marqués fueron derrotados y él padeció horriblemente.

V

La mañana del domingo posterior al día en el que la *Señal* había publicado el menú del último desayuno de Daniel Povey y la longitud exacta del «salto» que el verdugo le había administrado, Constanza y Cyril estaban junto a la ventana del dormitorio grande. El muchacho llevaba puesto su mejor traje, pero el atavío de Constanza no dejaba traslucir que fuera fiesta. Llevaba un gran delantal y un vestido viejo que le estaba estrecho. Estaba pálida y parecía enferma.

—¡Oh, mamá! —exclamó de improviso Cyril—, ¡Escucha! ¡Creo que oigo a la banda!

Ella le hizo callar con un mudo movimiento de los labios y los dos echaron una mirada preocupada al silencioso lecho; Cyril hizo un gesto como disculpándose de haber olvidado que no había que hacer ruido.

Los sones de la banda venían de King Street, en la dirección de la iglesia de San Lucas. La música parecía flotar largo rato a lo lejos y luego se acercaba y crecía en intensidad, y la Banda de Metales de Bursley pasó bajo la ventana al solemne ritmo de la Marcha Fúnebre de Haendel. El efecto de aquel réquiem, cargado de su intrínseca belleza y del peso de la tradición, fue hacer que a Constanza se le saltaran las lágrimas, que le caían en el seno, cubierto con el delantal; Constanza se hundió en un sillón. Y aunque los trompetistas inflaban las mejillas y el tambor tenía que sacar el estómago y arquear la espina dorsal hacia atrás para no caerse encima de su instrumento, había majestad en el paso de la banda. El redoble del tambor, que sonaba lúgubremente en las interrupciones de la melodía, oprimía el corazón, pero con una aflicción altiva; el canto fúnebre parecía tejer un palio púrpura que cubría toda mezquindad.

Los músicos no iban totalmente de negro, pero todos llevaban un crespón en la manga y en sus instrumentos iba otro crespón anudado. En el sombrero llevaban una tarjeta con orla de luto. Cyril tenía en la mano una de aquellas tarjetas, que decía así:

CONSAGRADO A LA MEMORIA DE

DANIEL POVEY

CONCEJAL DE ESTA VILLA

ASESINADO JUDICIALMENTE A LAS 8 DE LA MAÑANA

DEL 8 DE FEBRERO DE 1888

Detrás de la banda venía el anciano párroco, con la cabeza descubierta y una sobrepelliz encima del abrigo; desordenaba sus escasos cabellos blancos la brisa que jugueteaba en la fría luz del sol; en sus manos juntas llevaba un libro de cantos dorados. Seguían un coadjutor, sacristanes y ayudantes. Y después de éstos, marchando por el oscuro fango en una procesión que parecía no tener fin, serpenteaba la muchedumbre oficial masculina, casi todos de luto y todos, con excepción de los más aristocráticos, portando el recordatorio en el sombrero. Los haraganes, las mujeres y los niños se habían reunido en las aceras, que se iban secando; justo enfrente de Constanza había una ventana ornamentada con toda la familia del propietario de la Bodega del Sol. En la gran barra de la Bodega, un camarero se asomaba por encima de la mampara de pino que garantizaba la intimidad de los bebedores. La procesión continuó sin pausa, subiendo eternamente el arcén del «alto» de King Street y desapareciendo eternamente por la esquina de la Plaza de San Lucas; a intervalos la interrumpía un clérigo, un ministro de una iglesia no anglicana, un pregonero municipal o unos pocos miembros de los Fusileros Voluntarios. La multitud de espectadores aumentaba conforme se hacía más larga la procesión. Luego se oyó otra banda, que tocaba también la marcha de *Saúl.* La primera banda había llegado ya a la parte alta de la Plaza y apenas se la oía desde King Street. El reiterado destello de los recordatorios de los sombreros al sol producía la ilusión de una imposible serpiente blancuzca que se fuera extendiendo por la ciudad. Pasaron tres cuartos de hora antes de que se llegara a ver la cola de la serpiente; la cerraba una chusma de rapaces desaliñados que llenaba la calle.

—Voy a la ventana del salón, mamá —dijo Cyril.

Constanza hizo un gesto de asentimiento. Cyril salió del dormitorio sigilosamente.

La Plaza de San Lucas era un mar de sombreros y recordatorios. La mayoría de los residentes de la Plaza había puesto banderas a media asta y en el ayuntamiento, a lo lejos, ondeaba otra. En todas las ventanas había espectadores. Las dos bandas se habían reunido en lo alto de la Plaza; tras ellas, en un vagón del Ferrocarril de Staffordshire Norte, se hallaban en pie el párroco con su sobrepelliz blanca y varias figuras vestidas de negro. El párroco estaba hablando, pero sólo quienes estaban cerca del vagón oían la débil voz atiplada.

Tal fue la protesta masiva de Bursley contra lo que Bursley consideraba una flagrante injusticia. La ejecución de Daniel Povey había suscitado la sincera indignación de la ciudad. Aquella ejecución no era sólo una injusticia; era un insulto, un desaire humillante. Y lo peor era que el resto del país no había mostrado ciertamente ningún comprensivo interés por el asunto. Algunos periódicos de Londres, incluso, al comentar de pasada la ejecución, se habían referido injuriosamente a la moral y los modales de las Cinco Ciudades, afectando considerar la región notoriamente ajena al ámbito de los Diez Mandamientos. Aquello había contribuido a enfurecer a los ciudadanos. Aquello, tanto como cualquier otra cosa, había animado el espontáneo estallido de sentimiento que había culminado en una Plaza de San Lucas llena de gente con recordatorios en el sombrero. La manifestación apenas había sido organizada; de una u otra manera se había organizado sola, valiéndose de los lugares de culto y de unos pocos clubs como centros de reunión. Y resultó ser un enorme éxito. Había siete u ocho mil personas en la Plaza; la lástima fue que no pudiera toda Inglaterra tener una vislumbre de semejante espectáculo. Desde la ejecución del elefante, nada había agitado tan profundamente a Bursley.

Constanza, que salió un momento de la habitación para acudir al salón, pensó que la muerte y el sepelio del honorable abuelo de Cyril, aun habiendo sido un acontecimiento de gran eco, no había causado ni la décima parte de la conmoción que estaba contemplando. Pero es que John Baines no había matado a nadie.

El párroco llevaba demasiado rato hablando; todos tenían esa impresión. Pero por fin terminó. Las bandas interpretaron el *Gloria* y las enormes multitudes empezaron a dispersarse por las ocho calles que irradian desde la Plaza. En aquel momento dio la una y abrieron las tabernas con su acostumbrada y admirable puntualidad. Las personas respetables, naturalmente, hicieron caso omiso de ellas y se apresuraron a marchar a sus casas para el almuerzo, que iba retrasado. Pero en una ciudad de más de treinta mil habitantes hay suficiente escoria para llenar todas las tabernas en una ocasión de excitación ceremonial. Constanza vio la barra de la Bodega atestada de individuos cuyo sentido del decoro oportuno dejaba mucho que desear. El camarero y el propietario y los principales miembros de la familia de éste se las vieron y se las desearon para apagar aquella sed fúnebre. Constanza, que tomó una ligera colación en el dormitorio, no fue testigo de la orgía. Destacaba en el mostrador un músico con su instrumento plateado. A las tres menos cinco la Bodega vomitó un chorro de juerguistas que andaban por la acera como si estuvieran en la cuerda floja; entre ellos estaba el músico, con su instrumento plateado sólo medio envuelto en su bolsa de sarga verde. Buscó el equilibrio sobre el arroyo. No habría sido tan grave si no fuera un músico. El camarero y el

propietario echaron a empujones a la calle al último borrachín y cerraron la puerta (hasta las seis) en el mismo momento en que pasaba un policía, el primero del día. Se supo que escenas similares se estaban desarrollando en los umbrales de las demás tabernas. Y las personas juiciosas se entristecieron.

VI

Cuando el altercado entre el policía y el músico en el arroyo estaba en su apogeo, Samuel Povey se sintió inquieto, pero como apenas se había agitado mientras las bandas tocaban, no es probable que fueran los gritos del borracho los que le pusieron nervioso.

Había mostrado muy poco interés por los preliminares de la gran manifestación. La llama de su pasión por el caso de Daniel Povey parecía haber llegado al máximo el día antes de la ejecución y luego haberse extinguido. Aquel día fue a Stafford a ver a su primo por última vez, con permiso del director de la cárcel. Su estado, indudablemente, no se hallaba entonces muy lejos de la monomanía. «Trastornado» era la expresión convencional que a menudo le venía a la cabeza a Constanza para describir el estado mental de su marido, pero la reprimía, no quería aceptarla; era demasiado cruda, con las asociaciones que evocaba. Sólo admitía que el caso había sacado su mente «de quicio». Una prueba sorprendente de ello era que había sugerido que Cyril fuese con él a visitar al condenado. Quería que Cyril viese a Daniel; dijo gravemente que pensaba que Cyril debía verlo. La proposición era monstruosa, inexplicable —o explicable sólo dando por supuesto que su mente, aunque no estuviera trastornada, había perdido temporalmente el equilibrio. Constanza se negó rotundamente; como Samuel estaba muy debilitado en todos los aspectos, venció ella. En cuanto a Cyril, estaba dividido entre el miedo y la curiosidad. En conjunto, quizá, lamentaba no poder decir en el colegio que había hablado con el homicida más célebre del momento el día antes de su ejecución.

Samuel regresó histérico de Stafford. Su relato de la escena, que hizo en voz muy alta, fue extremadamente absurdo y sin embargo patético, evidentemente distorsionado en su memoria. Cuando llegó, en el momento de la entrada de Dick Povey, que estaba aún en el hospital y a quien habían traído especialmente a Stafford y llevado a la prisión, ya no pudo contenerse y se echó a llorar. Su histeria daba mucha lástima.

Se fue a la cama por decisión propia, pues la tos había mejorado de nuevo. Y al día siguiente, el día de la ejecución, se quedó en la cama hasta primera hora de la tarde; avanzada ésta el párroco mandó a buscarlo para hablar de la manifestación que se había pensado hacer. Al otro día, sábado, dijo que no se levantaría. Gélidos chaparrones azotaban la ciudad y su tos estaba peor tras la visita vespertina al párroco. Constanza no sintió ninguna aprensión por él. La parte más peligrosa del invierno había pasado y ahora no había nada que lo empujase a cometer imprudencias. Se dijo con tranquilidad que debía quedarse en cama todo el tiempo que quisiera, que el reposo nunca sería excesivo después de las fatigas físicas y espirituales que había sufrido. Tenía una tos seca, pero no tan molesta como en el pasado; su rostro estaba enrojecido y permanentemente melancólico; tenía algo de fiebre y el pulso y la respiración acelerados: los síntomas de un catarro renovado. Se pasó la noche en vela, durmiendo breves ratos y hablando en sueños. Al amanecer tomó algún alimento caliente, preguntó que día era, frunció el ceño y pareció amodorrarse enseguida. A las once rechazó la comida. Y durante la manifestación y su orgiástica secuela dormitó de manera intermitente.

Constanza tenía la comida preparada para cuando se despertara; se acercó a la cama y se inclinó sobre él. La fiebre había aumentado un poco, la respiración era más rápida y tenía los labios cubiertos de diminutos granos rojos. Al mencionar ella la comida sacudió la cabeza con expresión de repugnancia. Fue esta obstinada negativa a comer lo que la alarmó primero. Le acometió una leve e incómoda sospecha: ¿no le pasará nada, verdad?

Algo —no podría decir qué —hizo que se inclinara todavía más sobre él y aplicara el oído a su pecho. Dentro de aquella misteriosa caja oyó una rápida sucesión de sonidos tenues y secos, como crujidos, unos sonidos como los que uno produciría al frotarse los cabellos entre los dedos cerca del oído. Cesó la crepitación, luego volvió a empezar; Constanza se dio cuenta de que coincidía con la inhalación de aire. Tosió; los sonidos se hicieron más intensos; pasó por su rostro un espasmo de dolor y se puso la húmeda mano en el costado.

—¡Me duele el costado! —musitó con dificultad.

Constanza fue al salón, donde estaba Cyril dibujando junto a la chimenea.

—Cyril —dijo—, ve a decirle al doctor Harrop que venga inmediatamente. Y si no está él, se lo dices a su nuevo socio.

—¿Es papá?

—Sí.

—¿Qué pasa?

—Haz lo que te digo, por favor —dijo Constanza con sequedad, añadiendo—: No sé lo que pasa. Quizá no sea nada. Pero no estoy tranquila.

El venerable Harrop pronunció la palabra «pulmonía». Era pulmonía doble aguda lo que tenía Samuel. Durante los tres peores meses del año había escapado a los fatales peligros que aguardan a un hombre de pecho plano y tos crónica que desconoce su estado y desafía al mal tiempo. Pero un trayecto de quinientas yardas a la rectoría había sido la gota que rebosa el vaso. La rectoría estaba tan cerca de la tienda que no había tenido la precaución de abrigarse como para una excursión a Stafford. Sobrevivió a la crisis de la enfermedad y después murió de toxemia, causada por un corazón que no quiso realizar su función con la sangre. ¡Una muerte accidental, en la que apenas se reparó después de la gran manifestación febril! Además, Samuel Povey nunca pudo imponerse a los burgueses. Le faltaba personalidad. Era poquita cosa. Muchas veces me he reído de Samuel Povey. Pero me agradaba y lo respetaba. Fue un hombre muy honrado. Siempre me ha alegrado pensar que, al final de su vida, el destino se apoderó de él y puso de manifiesto ante el espectador la vena de grandeza que hay en todas las almas sin excepción. Él abrazó una causa, la perdió y murió por ella.

Capítulo VI

LA VIUDA

I

Constanza, a solas en la sala, aguardaba impaciente junto a la mesa puesta del té. No iba de luto; su madre y ella, cuando murió su padre, habían hablado de los diversos inconvenientes del luto; su madre lo había llevado a disgusto y sólo por una opinión pública no lo suficientemente avanzada, que la intimidaba. Constanza había dicho: «Si llego a quedarme viuda no lo llevaré», de manera rotunda, el tono de la juventud, y la señora Baines había replicado: «Espero que no, querida». De aquello hacía veinte años, pero Constanza lo recordaba perfectamente. ¡Y ahora se había quedado viuda! ¡Qué extraña e imponente era la vida! Y había hecho honor a su palabra; no de manera rotunda, sino con vacilaciones, pues aunque los tiempos habían cambiado, Bursley seguía siendo Bursley, pero había hecho honor a ella.

Era el primer lunes después del funeral de Samuel. La vida en la casa se había reanudado en el plano que en adelante sería el plano normal. Constanza se había puesto para el té un vestido de seda negro con un broche de azabache de su madre. Sus manos, que acababa de lavarse meticulosamente, tenía la sensación de que estaban sucias por causa de la aspereza de la piel tras pasarse un día tocando paños. Había estado «revisando» las cosas de Samuel y las suyas y ordenándolo todo de nuevo. Era sorprendente lo poco que había reunido él en cuanto a «cosas» en el transcurso de más de medio siglo. Toda su ropa se guardaba en dos cajones grandes y uno pequeño. Tenía la menor cantidad que se puede imaginar de ropa y de lencería, pues invariablemente cogía de la tienda los artículos que necesitaba, cuando los necesitaba, y nunca conservaba lo que se quedaba viejo. No poseía nada de joyería salvo un juego de gemelos de oro, un anillo para pañuelo y la alianza matrimonial; ésta había sido enterrada con él. Una vez, cuando Constanza le ofreció el reloj y cadena de oro de su padre, los rechazó cortésmente, diciendo que prefería el suyo, un reloj de plata (con un cordón negro) que iba muy bien; más adelante le dijo que podía guardar el reloj de oro y la cadena para cuando Cyril cumpliera los veintiún años. Además de aquellas chucherías y de una caja de cigarros medio vacía y unas gafas, no dejó nada personal. Algunos hombres dejan una cantidad de desperdicios que cuesta meses cribar y distribuir. Pero Samuel no tenía la manía de poseer. Constanza puso su ropa en una caja para irla dando poco a poco (todo excepto un abrigo y pañuelos que podrían servir para Cyril); guardó el reloj con su cordón negro, las gafas y el anillo para pañuelo; dio los gemelos de oro a Cyril, se subió a una silla y escondió la caja de cigarros encima de su armario; ¡y apenas quedó rastro de Samuel!

Por deseo de él mismo, el funeral había sido lo más sencillo y privado posible. Uno o dos parientes lejanos, a los cuales Constanza apenas conocía y que probablemente no volverían a visitarla hasta que ella misma muriera, vinieron... y se fueron. Y hete aquí que todo concluyó. La sencilla rapidez del funeral habría satisfecho hasta a Samuel, cuya enorme autoestima se ocultó tan eficazmente tras las apariencias externas que nadie la llegó a percibir plenamente. Ni siquiera Constanza conocía a fondo la secreta opinión que Samuel tenía de sí mismo. Constanza era consciente de que tenía un lado ridículo, que su mayor fallo era la falta de una dignidad espectacular. Ni siquiera en el ataúd, donde con todo la mayoría de la gente resulta finalmente efectiva, era Samuel impresionante, con su remilgada barbita gris que se empeñaba en ponerse de punta.

El verlo en su ataúd —en el cementerio, justo al final de King Street— y el momento en que clavaron la tapa ocultando aquella barba insignificante acudían con frecuencia a la memoria de la viuda como algo en cierto modo falso y engañoso. Tenía que decirse a sí misma: «¡Sí, es verdad que está ahí! Y por eso tengo esa sensación tan rara en el corazón». Lo veía como un objeto patético y nostálgico, no majestuoso. Y sin embargo pensaba sinceramente que no podía haber un marido más honrado, más justo, más digno de confianza, más bueno que Samuel. ¡Qué conciencia la suya! ¡Cómo trataba siempre de ser justo con ella! ¡Veinte años podía recordar de constantes e incesantes desvelos por comportarse de manera justa con ella! Podía recordar muchas ocasiones en que evidentemente se había reprimido, luchando contra su tendencia a ser brusco y huraño para concederle el respeto que se debe a una esposa. ¡Qué lealtad la suya! ¡Cuán mejor que ella misma era (pensó con modestia)!

Su muerte supuso para ella una amputación. Pero le hizo frente con serenidad. No se dejó vencer por la tristeza. No alimentó la idea de que su vida había terminado; por el contrario, la apartó de sí con obstinación, pensando en Cyril. No se dejó arrastrar por la enervadora voluptuosidad de la aflicción. Había empezado en las primeras horas del dolor de la pérdida imaginándose como una persona marcada por los

golpes del destino. Había perdido a su padre y a su madre, y ahora a su marido. Su trayectoria parecía salpicada de entierros. Pero al cabo de un rato vino su sentido común a insistirle en que la mayoría de los seres humanos pierden a sus padres, en que todo matrimonio concluye forzosamente en un viudo o una viuda y en que todas las trayectorias están salpicadas de entierros. ¿No había disfrutado de casi veintiún años de dichosa vida matrimonial? (¡Veintiún años que se habían pasado sin sentir! El súbito pensamiento de la ingenua ignorancia de ella y de él respecto a la vida cuando se casaron hizo que las lágrimas acudieran a sus ojos. ¡Cuán sabia y experimentada era ahora!) Y ¿no tenía a Cyril? En comparación con muchas mujeres era en verdad muy afortunada.

El único azote que era especialmente suyo era la desaparición de Sofía. Y sin embargo ni siquiera eso era peor que el que Sofía muriese;; tal vez no era tan malo, pues quizá Sofía volviera de la oscuridad. El golpe de la huida de Sofía le había parecido único cuando estaba reciente y mucho después; le había parecido que diferenciaba a la familia Baines de todas las demás familias con una vergüenza particular. Pero a los cuarenta y tres años Constanza había aprendido que esos acontecimientos no son raros en las familias ni son desconocidas sus extrañas secuelas. Pensaba en Sofía a menudo y muchas veces esperaba contra toda esperanza.

Miró el reloj; tuvo un pequeño espasmo de nerviosismo temiendo que Cyril faltase a su palabra aquel primer día de la nueva vida regular de ambos. Y en aquel instante el muchacho entró como una tromba en la habitación, invadiéndola como un ejército, después de asolar la tienda a su paso.

—¡No me he retrasado, mamá! ¡No me he retrasado! —exclamó con orgullo.

Ella sonrió cariñosamente, feliz por tenerlo, porque era su bálsamo y solaz. Él no sabía que en aquel robusto cuerpo familiar que tenía delante había un alma sensible y temblorosa que se aferraba a él extáticamente como la única realidad del universo. No sabía que aquella merienda, compartida sin prisa después de que el colegio se lo hubiera devuelto, había de ser el digno ceremonial de su íntima unión e interdependencia, una prueba tierna y deliciosa de que «lo eran todo el uno para el otro»: él sólo veía el té, que aguardaba con ansia, con tanta ansia como si su padre aún no se hubiese enfriado en la tumba.

Pero percibía oscuramente que la ocasión exigía algo que no era del todo corriente, y por ello se obligó a ser puerilmente encantador con su madre. Ella pensó en lo bueno que era. Él se sintió tranquilo y confiado respecto al futuro, pues detrás de la acostumbrada máscara judicial e imparcial de su madre captó un claro deseo de mimarlo.

Después del té Constanza lo dejó muy a su pesar con los deberes para ir a la tienda. La tienda era la gran cuestión sin resolver. ¿Qué iba a hacer con ella? ¿Seguiría con el negocio o lo vendería? Con las fortunas de su padre y de su tía y las economías de veinte años tenía medios más que suficientes. Era incluso rica, según los parámetros de la Plaza, ¡no; opulenta! En consecuencia no tenía ninguna necesidad material de conservar la tienda. Además, conservarla significaría supervisarla personalmente y cargar con una responsabilidad que su tranquila letargía rehuía. Por otra parte, deshacerse del negocio supondría romper lazos y abandonar el edificio, cosa que también rehuía. El joven Lawton, sin que se lo preguntara, le había aconsejado la venta. Pero ella no quería vender. Quería lo imposible: que las cosas continuaran en el futuro como eran en el pasado, que la muerte de Samuel no cambiara nada excepto en su corazón.

En aquella época la señorita Insull fue inapreciable. Constanza entendía a fondo una parte de la tienda, pero la señorita Insull las comprendía las dos, y también sus finanzas. La señorita Insull podría haber dirigido el establecimiento de una forma meritoria, si no brillante. En realidad lo estaba dirigiendo en aquel momento. Constanza, no obstante, tenía celos de la señorita Insull; era consciente de la leve antipatía que sentía hacia la fiel empleada. No sentía ningún deseo de estar en sus manos.

En el mostrador de sombrerería había una o dos clientas. La saludaron con un deplorable derroche de tacto. Con gran discreción, evitaron toda referencia a su reciente pérdida, pero por su tono, sus miradas a Constanza y entre sí y sus suspiros, heroicamente reprimidos, extendieron la desolación como si extendieran cenizas en el pan en vez de mantequilla. Las dependientas hacían gala también de un comportamiento especial para con la pobre viuda solitaria que le resultaba desquiciante. Ella quería comportarse con naturalidad, y lo habría conseguido de no ser porque todas ellas parecían conspirar para hacérselo imposible.

Se fue al otro extremo de la tienda, al pupitre de Samuel, donde él acostumbraba a estar, mirando distraídamente por la ventanita que daba a King Street mientras echaba cuentas en un murmullo. Encendió el gas, colocó la lámpara como mejor le venía y después levantó la gran tapa del pupitre y sacó algunos libros de contabilidad.

—¡Señorita Insull! —llamó en *voz* baja y clara con un deje de altivez y mando. Adoptó

deliberadamente aquella actitud, en cómica contradicción con su carácter benévolo; ilustraba los efectos que tienen los celos hasta en la disposición más blanda.

La señorita Insull contestó. No tenía más remedio que contestar. Y no dio muestras de que le molestara la actitud de su patrona. Pero es que la señorita Insull rara vez daba muestras de que fuese humana.

Se marcharon las clientas una tras otra, entre las serviles expresiones de despedida de las dependientas, que de inmediato bajaron un poco el gas, obedeciendo una norma secular; en la subsiguiente penumbra, mientras volvían a colocar las cajas en los estantes, oyeron la conversación tranquila *y* regular, casi en susurros, de las dos mujeres en el pupitre, examinando cuentas, y luego el tintineo del oro.

Súbitamente hubo una interrupción. Una de las dependientas se precipitó instintivamente hacia el gas, pero al darse cuenta de que quien perturbaba la paz no era más que una arrapieza de aspecto desalmado, sin sombrero y no muy limpia, decidió dejar el gas como estaba y adoptó una actitud condescendiente y recelosa.

—Por favor, ¿puedo hablar con la señora? —dijo la muchacha sin aliento.

Aparentaba unos dieciocho años; era gruesa y poco agraciada. Su vestido azul estaba roto y encima de él llevaba un tosco delantal marrón, recogido en una esquina a la cintura. Sus desnudos antebrazos eran de un rojo ladrillo.

—¿Qué quiere? —le preguntó la dependienta.

La señorita Insull miró por encima del hombro al otro lado de la tienda.

—¡Debe de ser la hija de Maggie..., de la señora Hollins! —dijo en voz muy baja.

—¿Qué querrá? —dijo Constanza, abandonando de inmediato el pupitre; y a la chica, que estaba allí defendiéndose con tenacidad del grupo de dependientas—: Es la hija del señor Hollins, ¿verdad?

—Sí, señora.

—¿Cómo se llama?

—Maggie, señora. Si tiene la bondad, mamá me ha mandado para que le pregunte si sería tan amable de darle un recordatorio.

—¿Un recordatorio?

—Sí. Del señor Povey. Esperaba recibirlo y pensó que quizá se le había olvidado, sobre todo porque no la invitó al funeral.

La muchacha se interrumpió.

Constanza se dio cuenta de que por un simple descuido había herido los sentimientos de Maggie madre. La verdad era que ni había pensado en Maggie. Debería haberse acordado de que los recordatorios fúnebres eran casi el único ornamento de la abominable casa de Maggie.

—Claro —respondió tras una pausa—. Señorita Insull, en el cajón hay todavía unos cuantos, ¿no? Por favor, métame uno en un sobre para la señora Hollins.

Entregó el sobre con su gruesa orla a la rubicunda moza, que lo guardó en el delantal y, dando las gracias tímida y apresuradamente, desapareció.

—Dile a tu madre que le envío una tarjeta con mucho gusto —le dijo Constanza mientras se iba.

Lo extraños que son los azares de la vida la hicieron reflexionar. Ella, a quien Maggie siempre le había parecido una vieja, era viuda, pero el marido de Maggie aún vivía como un lozano inválido. Y se figuró que Maggie, luchando con la pobreza y la miseria, en cierto modo era feliz a su manera desastrada y despreocupada.

Volvió a las cuentas, soñando.

Una vez se hubo cerrado la tienda bajo su propia supervisión exacta y crítica, apagó la última lámpara y volvió a la sala, preguntándose dónde podría descubrir algún hombre o muchacho totalmente de fiar para ocuparse de los postigos por la noche y por la mañana. Samuel solía hacerlo personalmente, y en ocasiones extraordinarias y en vacaciones la señorita Insull y una de sus subordinadas luchaban con aquellos postigos, tan pesados e inmanejables. Pero la ocasión extraordinaria se había vuelto ordinaria y no se podía esperar que la señorita Insull siguiera indefinidamente desempeñando funciones propias de un varón. Constanza tenía la intención de contratar un recadero, un lujo en contra del cual Samuel siempre se había manifestado. Ni en sueños le pediría al hercúleo Cyril que abriera y cerrara la tienda.

Al parecer había terminado con los deberes. Había apartado los libros a un lado y estaba dibujando en un cuaderno con lápiz de plomo. A la derecha de la chimenea, sobre el sofá, colgaba un grabado de un cuadro de Landsheer en el que se veía un ciervo solitario con las patas metidas en un lago, en el crepúsculo. Iba a beber o acababa de hacerlo; Cyril lo estaba copiando. Ya había esbozado una bandada de pájaros en término medio; al ser más fáciles los vagos pájaros en vuelo que los ciervos con todo detalle, había empezado por aquéllos.

Constanza le puso la mano en el hombro.

—¿Has acabado los deberes? —murmuró con despreocupación.

Antes de hablar, Cyril levantó la vista hacia la estampa con expresión ceñuda y después replicó con voz ausente.

—Sí. —Y tras una pausa—: Menos la aritmética. La haré mañana, antes de desayunar.

—¡Oh, Cyril! —protestó ella.

Durante mucho tiempo había sido una norma categórica que no se dibujaba hasta que los deberes estaban hechos. En vida de su padre Cyril no se había atrevido a quebrantarla.

Se inclinó sobre el cuaderno, fingiendo estar profundamente absorto. Constanza retiró la mano de su hombro. Quería mandarle formalmente que se pusiera de nuevo con los deberes. Pero no pudo. Temía una discusión; no confiaba en sí misma. ¡Y, además, había pasado tan poco tiempo desde la muerte de su padre!

—¡Si sabes que no tendrás tiempo mañana! —dijo débilmente.

—¡Oh, mamá! —replicó en tono de superioridad— No te preocupes. —Y luego, zalamero—: Hacía siglos que quería dibujar este ciervo.

Ella suspiró y se sentó en su mecedora. Él siguió dibujando, borrando y haciendo extraños ruidos de reconvención dirigidos al lápiz o a las dificultades inventadas sin necesidad por sir Edwin Landsheer. Una vez se levantó y cambió la lámpara de posición, mirando ferozmente la estampa, como si hubiese cometido un pecado.

Entró Amy a servir la cena. Él ni siquiera se dio por enterado de su presencia.

—¡Vamos, señor Cyril, a la mesa, por favor! —Se anunció bruscamente, con el privilegio de una antigua sirvienta y de una mujer que pasaba de los treinta.

—¡Eres un incordio, Amy! —respondió Cyril con aspereza— Oye, mamá, ¿no podría Amy poner el mantel en esta mitad de la mesa? Estoy justo en la mitad del dibujo. Hay sitio de sobra para dos.

No pareció darse cuenta de que en las palabras «sitio de sobra para dos» había hecho una cruel referencia a la pérdida que habían sufrido. La cosa era que en efecto había sitio de sobra para dos.

Constanza dijo rápidamente:

—Muy bien, Amy. Sólo por esta vez.

Amy gruñó, pero obedeció.

Constanza tuvo que llamarlo dos veces para que dejase el arte por el alimento. Comió deprisa, echando

frecuentes miradas al grabado con ojos entrecerrados e inquisitivos. Cuando terminó, volvió a llenar el vaso de agua y lo puso junto al cuaderno de dibujo.

—¡No pensarás ponerte a dibujar a estas horas de la noche! —exclamó sorprendida Constanza.

—¡Oh, sí, mamá! —suplicó ansiosamente—. No es tarde.

Otra norma categórica de su padre era que después de cenar no se hacía nada salvo irse a dormir. Las nueve era la hora límite de acostarse que le estaba permitida. En aquel momento quedaba como un cuarto de hora.

—Sólo faltan veinte minutos para las nueve —señaló Constanza.

—Bueno, ¿y qué?

—Oye, Cyril —dijo ella—. Espero que seas un buen chico y no causes preocupaciones a tu madre.

Pero lo dijo con excesiva amabilidad. Él contestó hoscamente:

—Creo que podías dejarme terminar. Ya lo he empezado. No tardaré mucho.

Constanza cometió el error de omitir el punto principal.

—¿Cómo puedes elegir bien los colores con luz de gas? —dijo.

—Lo voy a hacer en sepia —contestó el muchacho, triunfante.

—Que no vuelva a ocurrir —dijo ella.

Él dio las gracias a Dios por la cena y corrió al armonio, donde estaba su caja de pinturas. Amy recogió la mesa. Constanza cogió su labor de crochet. Se hizo el silencio. El reloj dio las nueve y después las nueve y media. Ella le advirtió repetidas veces. A las diez menos diez le dijo en tono persuasivo:

—Bueno, Cyril, cuando den las diez voy a apagar el gas, de verdad.

Dieron las diez.

—¡Un segundo, un segundo! —clamó—¡Ya termino! ¡Ya termino!

La mano de Constanza se detuvo.

Pasaron otros cuatro minutos y después Cyril se puso en pie de un salto.

—¡Ya está! —dijo orgulloso, enseñándole el cuaderno. Y todos sus gestos estaban llenos de gracia y zalamería.

—Sí; está muy bien —dijo Constanza en tono bastante indiferente.

—¡Creo que no te interesa! —la acusó Cyril, pero con una luminosa sonrisa.

—Me interesa tu salud —repuso ella—¡Tú mira el reloj!

Él se sentó con gesto pausado en la otra mecedora.

—¡Vamos, Cyril!

—¡Bueno, mamá, supongo que me dejarás que me quite las botas! —dijo con un buen humor burlón.

Cuando le dio el beso de buenas noches, ella deseó aferrarse a él, tan cariñoso fue aquel beso; pero no pudo deshacerse de los hábitos de contención que le habían enseñado desde el principio y que había practicado toda su vida. Lamentó profundamente su incapacidad.

En su dormitorio escuchó sus movimientos mientras se desvestía. La puerta entre las dos habitaciones no tenía echado el pestillo. Tuvo que dominar sus deseos de abrirla aunque sólo fuese un poco y mirarlo a hurtadillas. A él no le habría gustado. Él podía enriquecer su corazón más allá de toda esperanza y sin que le costase nada, pero no conocía su poder. Como no pudo aferrarse a él con las manos se aferró con aquel corazón suyo, mientras andaba lentamente de arriba abajo por la habitación, sola. Y sus ojos lo veían a través

de la puerta de madera maciza. Al final se dejó caer en la cama. En la oscuridad pensó con plácida ansiedad: «Tendré que ser firme con Cyril». Y al tiempo pensó: «Tiene que ser un buen chico. Tiene que serlo». ¡Y se aferró a él apasionadamente, sin sentir vergüenza! Tendida allí sola en la oscuridad pudo ser tan infantil e inmoderada como decidiera su corazón. Cuando aflojó su abrazo vio inmediatamente al padre del muchacho en el ataúd o yendo y viniendo por la habitación. Entonces abrazó también aquella visión, por el placer del dolor que le causaba.

III

Los días que siguieron se sintió tranquila con respecto a Cyril. No intentó repetir su ingeniosa travesura de la noche del lunes y acudió a casa directamente a la hora del té; además, como una especie de milagro hecho para deslumbrarla, el martes por la mañana se levantó en efecto temprano para hacer la aritmética. Para expresar su satisfacción, Constanza había hecho un marco de paja especialmente elaborado, destinado al dibujo copia del motivo de sir Edwind Landsheer y lo había colgado en su habitación: un honor que Cyril apreció. Era todo lo feliz que puede ser una mujer que ha sufrido recientemente una amputación; en comparación con la prolongada pesadilla creada por la monomanía y la enfermedad de Samuel, su existencia parecía poseer ahora una benéfica tranquilidad.

Cyril, según pensaba Constanza, había reparado en la importancia que para ella tenía el té, aquella hora vespertina y aquella compañía que eran lo mejor de su jornada. Y tenía tal confianza en la bondad de su hijo que vertía el agua hirviendo sobre las hojas de té Horniman aun antes de que llegase: estaba absolutamente segura. ¡Y entonces, el viernes de la primera semana, llegó tarde! Entró de un brinco después de oscurecer; el estado de su ropa indicaba con demasiada claridad que venía de jugar al fútbol en el barrizal que en verano era un campo de hierba.

—¿Te has tenido que quedar castigado, hijo? —preguntó por guardar las formas.

—No, mamá —dijo como si nada— Es que hemos estado dándole a la pelota un poco. ¿Es tarde?

—Mejor ve a adecentarte —dijo ella sin contestar a su pregunta—. No puedes sentarte así. Diré que te hagan más té. Éste se ha echado a perder.

—¡Oh, muy bien!

¡El sagrado té de Constanza —la institución que quería santificar mediante un prolongado hábito y que había de contar más que nada entre ellos— sacrificado a dar patadas a una pelota de fútbol en el barro! ¡Y no hacía diez días que habían enterrado a su padre! Se sintió herida: era una herida profunda, limpia, peligrosa, que no sangraba. Trató de alegrarse de que no hubiera mentido; le hubiera resultado fácil hacerlo, diciendo que lo habían retenido como castigo y no había podido evitar el retraso. ¡No! No era dado a mentir; mentiría, como cualquier ser humano, cuando una ocasión importante exigiese esa prudencia, pero no era un embustero; en justicia se podía decir que era un chico sincero. Trató de alegrarse, pero no lo consiguió. Hubiera preferido que mintiera.

Amy, rezongando, tuvo que hervir más agua.

Cuando Cyril regresó a la sala, más o menos limpio, Constanza esperaba que se disculpase con circunloquios, a su manera infantil; por lo menos que la conquistara y se la camelara, que demostrara con algún gesto que era consciente de haberla ofendido. Pero su actitud era muy otra. Era considerablemente brusca, autoritaria y ruidosa. Se zampó una notable cantidad de mermelada con excesiva rapidez y luego pidió más en el tono de un monarca que reclama lo que es suyo. Y antes de acabarse el té dijo osadamente, sin que viniera a cuento:

—Oye, mamá, después de Pascua tienes que dejarme ir a la Escuela de Arte.

Y la miró fijamente con expresión retadora.

Al hablar de la Escuela de Arte se refería a las clases vespertinas de la Escuela de Arte. Su padre era totalmente contrario al proyecto. Su padre había dicho que afectaría al colegio, que le haría acostarse demasiado tarde y que supondría que no estuviera en casa por las tardes. Esto último había sido siempre la

auténtica objeción. Su padre no podía creer que el deseo de Cyril de estudiar arte tuviera su origen puramente en su amor por el arte; no podía evitar la sospecha de que era un plan para tener libertad por las tardes, esa libertad que Samuel había prohibido invariablemente. En todas las sugerencias de Cyril, Samuel había sido rápido en identificar el mismo plan oculto. A final había dicho que cuando Cyril saliera del colegio y emprendiese una carrera podría estudiar arte por las noches si quería, pero no antes.

—¡Ya sabes lo que dijo tu padre! —replicó Constanza.

—¡Pero, mamá! ¡Si está todo muy bien! Estoy seguro de que papá habría estado de acuerdo. Si voy a dedicarme al dibujo tengo que empezar inmediatamente. Es lo que dice el profesor de dibujo; supongo que él lo sabrá —concluyó en un tono insolente.

—Todavía no puedo dejarte ir —dijo Constanza con calma—. Está totalmente fuera de discusión. ¡Totalmente!

Él hizo un mohín y después se enfurruñó. Era la guerra entre ellos. Algunas veces era la viva imagen de su tía Sofía. No quería dejar las cosas como estaban, pero no quería escuchar las razones de Constanza. La acusó abiertamente de ser dura con él. Le preguntó cómo podía esperar que avanzara si contrariaba sus deseos más serios. Le señaló otros chicos cuyos padres obraban con más sabiduría.

—¡Está muy bien eso de echarle la culpa a papá! —observó sarcásticamente.

Abandonó enteramente el dibujo.

Cuando ella le insinuó que si asistía a la Escuela de Arte se vería condenada a pasar las tardes sola, la miró como diciendo: «Bueno, ¿y qué?». Al parecer no tuvo valor para decírselo.

Tras varias semanas de profunda infelicidad dijo Constanza:

—¿Cuántas tardes quieres ir?

La guerra había terminado.

Cyril volvió a ser encantador. Cuando Constanza estaba sola podía aferrarse a él de nuevo. Y se dijo: «Si para que podamos ser felices juntos es preciso que ceda, tendré que ceder». Y hubo éxtasis en su manera de ceder. «Al fin y al cabo —se dijo— quizá sea muy importante que vaya a la Escuela de Arte». Hallaba solaz en estos pensamientos tres tardes solitarias a la semana, mientras esperaba que volviera a casa.

Capitulo VII

CAL Y CANTO

I

El verano de aquel año, la aparición de una blanca erupción de carteles en numerosas vallas y en algunas casas y tiendas fue síntoma de un cambio orgánico en la ciudad. Los carteles repetían un misterioso anuncio y una citación, que empezaban con las augustas palabras: «Por orden de los fideicomisarios del difunto Sr. D. William Clews Mericarp». Mericarp poseía considerables propiedades en Bursley. Tras una prolongada residencia en Southport, había muerto a los ochenta y dos años dejando todas sus propiedades. Durante sesenta años había sido un nombre, no un personaje; la noticia de su muerte, que era sin duda un acontecimiento, incitó a los burgueses al cotilleo, pues habían llegado a tenerlo por uno de los inmortales invisibles. Constanza se sintió conmocionada, aunque nunca había visto a Mericarp. («¡Hoy en día todo el mundo se muere!», pensó). Era propietario de la tienda Baines-Povey y también del establecimiento del señor Critchlow. Constanza no sabía cuántas veces habían renovado su padre y luego su difunto esposo el arriendo de aquel edificio que ahora era suyo, pero tenía el vago recuerdo de haber oído desde que tenía uso de razón a su padre hablando con su madre de la «renta de Mericarp», que era y había sido siempre de cien al año. Mericarp se había granjeado la fama de ser «un buen casero». Constanza dijo con tristeza: «¡Nunca tendremos otro tan bueno!». Cuando recibió la visita del empleado de un abogado, que le pidió permiso para poner un cartel en cada uno de sus escaparates, tuvo recelos por el futuro; se sintió preocupada y decidió rescindir el arriendo al año siguiente, para mayor seguridad, pero inmediatamente después decidió que no podía decidir nada.

Los carteles continuaban: «Se venderá en pública subasta en el Hotel del Tigre a las seis y media para las siete, hora exacta». Qué tienen que ver las seis y media con las siete, hora exacta, nadie lo sabía. Después, tras declarar el nombre y referencias del subastador, los carteles llegaban por fin a los objetos en venta: «Todas estas fincas y tiendas en plena propiedad y posesiones en arriendo, a saber». En Bursley nunca se habían vendido casas en subasta. En los momentos de subasta se recordaba a los burgueses que los edificios en los que vivían no eran casas, como equivocadamente habían imaginado, sino fincas. Tras llegar hasta «a saber», los carteles trazaban una línea y recomenzaban: «Lote 1. Toda la amplia y espaciosa tienda y finca con oficinas y dependencias a ella pertenecientes situada y formando el nº 4 de la Plaza de San Lucas en la parroquia de Bursley, condado de Stafford, y en la actualidad ocupada por doña Constanza Povey, viuda, en arriendo que expira en septiembre de 1889». Declarando así palmariamente que toda la tienda de Constanza estaba en venta, en su totalidad y no solamente una fracción o tajada de ella, los carteles proseguían: «Lote nº 2. Toda la amplia y espaciosa tienda y finca con las oficinas y dependencias a ella pertenecientes situada y formando el nº 3 de la Plaza de San Lucas en la parroquia de Bursley, condado de Stafford, y en la actualidad ocupada por Charles Critchlow, farmacéutico, por contrato de arriendo anual». El catálogo contenía catorce lotes. Los carteles, no fuera a ser que alguien se imaginara estúpidamente que un intelecto no legal pudiera alcanzar semejante claridad de juicio explícita y general, estaban firmados por un poderoso bufete de abogados de Hanbridge. Afortunadamente, en las Cinco Ciudades no había ningún metafísico; de otro modo lo mismo se habría esperado que el bufete explicara, con los «ulteriores pormenores y condiciones» que los carteles prometían, cómo incluso una finca podía «ser» la cosa en la cual estaba «situada».

A las pocas horas del brote de la erupción, el señor Critchlow se presentó de improviso ante Constanza en el mostrador de sombrerería, agitando un cartel.

—¡Bueno! —exclamó sombríamente—¿Adonde vamos a ir a parar, eh?

—¡Sí, ya lo creo! —respondió Constanza.

—¿Piensa usted comprar? —preguntó. Todas las dependientas, incluyendo a la señorita Insull, estaban delante, pero él hizo caso omiso de su presencia.

—¡Comprar! —repitió Constanza—. ¡Qué va! Ya tengo bastante casa tal como es.

Como todos los dueños de una propiedad, adoptaba habitualmente hacia ella una actitud que implicaba que estaría dispuesta a pagar porque se la quitaran de encima.

—¿Y usted? —añadió, con la misma brusquedad del señor Critchlow.

—¡Yo! ¡Comprar una propiedad en la Plaza de San Lucas! —exclamó desdeñosamente el señor Critchlow. Y luego salió de la tienda tan repentinamente como había entrado.

El desdén por la Plaza de San Lucas era su expresión característica de una opinión que se había ido formando poco a poco en el transcurso de algunos años. La Plaza ya no era lo que había sido, aunque los negocios concretos acaso fuesen tan bien como siempre. Había dos tiendas que llevaban casi doce meses ofrecidas en alquiler. Y en una ocasión la quiebra había manchado sus anales. Los comerciantes, como es natural, habían buscado la causa en todas las direcciones salvo en la correcta, la evidente, y, como es natural, habían encontrado una causa. Según los comerciantes, la causa era «eso del fútbol». El Club de Fútbol de Bursley había crecido recientemente hasta convertirse en un auténtico rival de la antigua supremacía del célebre Club de Knype. Se había transformado en una sociedad de responsabilidad limitada; había alquilado un terreno por la carretera de Moorthorne y había construido un gran pabellón. El C. F. Bursley había empatado con el C. F. Knype en el campo de Knype: ¡una hazaña prodigiosa, una hazaña que ocupó una columna en el *Noticiario Atlético* un lunes por la mañana! Pero ¿se sintieron los comerciantes cívicamente orgullosos de esta gloria? ¡No! Dijeron que «eso del fútbol» hacía salir de la ciudad a la gente los sábados por la tarde, con la consecuencia de la completa abolición de las compras. Dijeron también que la gente no pensaba en otra cosa que en «eso del fútbol» y, casi sin recobrar el aliento, que sólo los gamberros y los inútiles podrían interesarse por tan bárbaro juego. Y hablaron de recaudación, apuestas y profesionalización, y del fin de todo verdadero deporte en Inglaterra. En suma, algo nuevo se había puesto en primer plano y estaba sufriendo la dura prueba de las maldiciones.

La venta del patrimonio de Mericarp tenía especial interés para las personas respetables que tenían inversiones en la ciudad. Indicaría en qué medida, de ser así, estaba arruinando a Bursley «eso del fútbol».

Constanza mencionó a Cyril que quizá le apeteciera ir a la subasta; como estaba fijada para una de las tardes libres del muchacho, éste dijo que quizá le apeteciera a él también. Así pues, fueron los dos; Samuel acostumbraba a asistir a las ventas de propiedades, pero nunca había llevado a su mujer. Constanza y Cyril llegaron al Hotel del Tigre algo pasadas las siete y fueron conducidos a una habitación amueblada y dispuesta como para una pequeña reunión pública de filántropos. Estaban ya presentes algunos caballeros, pero no los fideicomisarios, abogados y subastadores instigadores. Al parecer, «las seis y media para las siete» significaba las siete y cuarto. Constanza ocupó una silla Windsor en el rincón más cercano a la puerta e indicó a Cyril la siguiente; no se atrevían a hablar, andaban de puntillas; Cyril, sin darse cuenta, arrastró su silla por el suelo produciendo un chirrido; se ruborizó como si hubiese cometido un sacrilegio y su madre hizo un gesto de horror. Los componentes del grupo echaron una rápida mirada hacia el rincón, al parecer dolidos por aquel descuido. Algunos de ellos saludaron a Constanza, pero tímidamente, como avergonzados; tal vez fuera que se hubiesen reunido allí para cometer un crimen nefando. Por fortuna, la viudez de Constanza había perdido ya su enternecedor carácter de novedad, de manera que los saludos, aunque tímidos, estuvieron por lo menos libres de insoportable conmiseración y no resultaron embarazosos.

Cuando llegó el mundo oficial, ajetreado y quisquilloso, portando documentos y un martillo, se intensificó el sentimiento general de vergüenza culpable. ¡Era inútil que el subastador tratase de disipar la melancolía por medio de alegres gestos y de rápidas y animadas observaciones dirigidas a sus partidarios! Cyril tenía la idea de que la reunión se iniciaría con un himno, hasta que la aparición de un escanciador con vino le demostró que estaba en un error. El subastador encareció con gran empeño al escanciador que nadie se quedase con sed, y él cumplió su cometido con gran energía. Empezó por Constanza. Al rehusar el vino, ésta enrojeció; después el tipo ofreció un vaso a Cyril, que se puso de color escarlata y murmuró «no» con un nudo en la garganta; cuando el escanciador volvió la espalda sonrió tímidamente a su madre. La mayor parte de los presentes lo aceptaron y se lo bebieron. El subastador bebió, se pasó ruidosamente la lengua por los labios y exclamó:

—¡Ah!

Entró el señor Critchlow.

Y el subastador volvió a exclamar:

—¡Ah! Siempre me alegra que vengan los arrendatarios. Siempre es buena señal.

Echó una mirada en torno suyo buscando aprobación para este sentimiento. Pero todo el mundo parecía estar demasiado rígido para moverse. Hasta el subastador parecía sentirse violento.

—¡Camarero! ¡Ofrezca vino al señor Critchlow! —exclamó en tono intimidatorio, como diciendo

«¡Hombre! ¿En qué demonios está usted pensando, que se olvida del señor Critchlow?».

—Sí, señor; sí, señor —dijo el camarero, que estaba sirviendo el vino con toda la celeridad posible en un camarero.

Comenzó la subasta.

Agarrando el martillo, el subastador trazó una breve biografía de William Clews Mericarp y, una vez cumplido este piadoso deber, conminó a un abogado a que leyera las condiciones de la venta. El abogado obedeció e hizo una penosa exhibición de cortedad. Las condiciones de la venta eran muy extensas y al parecer estaban redactadas en una lengua extranjera; el público escuchó aquella elocución simulando estoicamente un interés pasmoso.

Después, el subastador ofreció toda la amplia y espaciosa tienda y finca situada y formando el nº 4 de la Plaza de San Lucas. Constanza y Cyril se removieron furtivamente, como si al final hubieran sido descubiertos. El subastador aludió a John Baines y a Samuel Povey como si fueran pérdidas personales suyas y luego expresó su placer por la presencia de «las señoras»; quería decir de Constanza, que una vez más hubo de sonrojarse.

—Ahora, caballeros —dijo el subastador—, ¿qué ofrecen ustedes por este famoso establecimiento? Creo que no exagero si utilizo la palabra «famoso».

Alguien dijo mil libras, con la voz aterrorizada de un delincuente.

—Mil libras —repitió el subastador; hizo una pausa, bebió y se relamió.

—Guineas[37] —dijo otra voz que se acusaba de iniquidad.

—Mil cincuenta —dijo el subastador.

Después hubo un largo intervalo, un intervalo que puso en tensión los nervios de la asamblea.

—Vamos, señoras y señores... —imploró el subastador.

La primera voz dijo malhumorada:

—Mil cien.

Y así fue subiendo la puja a mil quinientas, elevada poco a poco, por así decirlo, por la fuerza magnética de la personalidad del subastador. El hombre se erguía ahora dominante. Se inclinó hacia la cabeza del abogado; hablaron en susurros.

—Señores —dijo el subastador—, me complace informarles de que la venta está ahora abierta. —Su tono expresó mejor que sus palabras su tranquila beatitud profesional. De improviso, con voz airada, siseó al camarero:

—Camarero, ¿por qué no sirve a estos caballeros?

—Sí, señor; sí, señor.

El subastador se sentó y bebió despaciosamente, charlando con su empleado, con el abogado y con el empleado del abogado.

Cuando se puso en pie era un conquistador.

—Señores, ofrecen mil quinientas libras. Vamos, señor Critchlow.

El señor Critchlow meneó la cabeza. El subastador echó una mirada cortés a Constanza, que la evitó.

Después de muchas súplicas, levantó el martillo de mala gana y varias veces fingió dejarlo caer y se detuvo.

Y entonces el señor Critchlow dijo:

—Y cincuenta más.

—Se ofrecen mil quinientas cincuenta —informó el subastador a los circunstantes, electrificando una

vez más al camarero. Y después de beber dijo con afectada tristeza:

—Vamos, señores, ¡no querrán dejar escapar este magnífico lote por mil quinientas cincuenta libras!

Pero sí que querían.

Cayó el martillo; el empleado del subastador y el del abogado se llevaron a un lado al señor Critchlow y todos escribieron.

A nadie le sorprendió que el señor Critchlow comprara el Lote nº 2, su propia tienda.

Constanza susurró entonces a Cyril que deseaba marcharse. Se fueron con unas precauciones poco naturales, pero una vez en la oscura calle volvieron a conducirse con normalidad.

—¡Nunca me lo hubiera figurado! ¡Nunca me lo hubiera figurado! —murmuró Constanza, sorprendida y perturbada.

Aborrecía la perspectiva de tener de casero al señor Critchlow.

Y sin embargo no podía ni pensar en dejar la casa, a pesar de las decisiones tomadas.

La venta demostró que el fútbol no había debilitado del todo la base comercial de la sociedad de Bursley; sólo dos lotes hubieron de ser retirados.

II

La tarde del martes de aquella misma semana, el joven que Constanza había acabado contratando para la manipulación de los postigos y otros trabajos no aptos para frágiles mujeres estaba cerrando la tienda. Habían dado las dos. Todos los cierres estaban echados excepto el último, en medio de la entrada. La señorita Insull y su patrona andaban por el interior en penumbra, cubriendo con fundas los artículos expuestos; las otras dependientas acababan de irse. El bullterrier había entrado en la tienda, como hacía casi invariablemente a la hora de cerrar —pues dormía allí en calidad de eficaz guardián—, y se había echado junto a la estufa a medio apagar; aunque no era venerable, la edad lo iba anquilosando.

—Ya puede cerrar —dijo la señorita Insull al chico.

Pero cuando el último cierre estaba llegando a su sitio apareció en la acera el señor Critchlow.

—¡Espere, joven! —ordenó el señor Critchlow, y pasó con lentitud sobre el cierre horizontal sobre el que se apoyaban los verticales en la entrada.

—¿Va a tardar mucho, señor Critchlow? —preguntó el joven, colocando el postigo —. ¿O cierro?

—Cierra, chico —dijo sumariamente el señor Critchlow.

—¡Está aquí el señor Critchlow! —llamó la señorita Insull a Constanza con un tono de voz peculiar. Y un rubor apenas perceptible se difundió muy despacio por su moreno rostro. A la media luz de la tienda, iluminada sólo por unos pocos agujeros en forma de estrella en los cierres y por la pequeña ventana lateral, ni la vista más aguda podría haber captado aquel rubor.

—¡Señor Critchlow! —exclamó Constanza en un murmullo. Le disgustaba que se convirtiera en dueño de su tienda. Pensaba que venía a dárselas de propietario y resolvió hacerle ver que ella tenía un talante libre e independiente y que tanto le daba ceder el negocio como conservarlo. Sobre todo se propuso acusarlo de haberla engañado a propósito, en su visita anterior, en lo tocante a sus intenciones.

—¡Bien, señora! —la saludó el anciano—. Ya lo tenemos todo arreglado. Puede que algunos piensen que nos ha llevado tiempo, pero no creo que sea asunto suyo.

Sus ojillos parpadeantes estaban circundados de rojo. La piel de su cara pequeña y pálida tenía millones de diminutas arrugas. Sus brazos y piernas eran fabulosamente delgados y angulosos. Los ángulos de

sus labios de color de heliotropo se volvían hacia abajo, como de costumbre, haciendo un misterioso comentario sobre el mundo, y su sonrisa, al ponerse delante de Constanza con su excesiva estatura, coronaba el misterio.

Constanza se le quedó mirando desconcertada. ¡Indudablemente no podía ser verdad al final todo aquello, la esencia de los rumores que habían flotado como vapores por la Plaza durante ocho años o más!

—¿Qué...? —empezó.

—¡Ella y yo! —sacudió la cabeza en dirección a la señorita Insull.

El perro se había acercado pausadamente a inspeccionar los bajos de los pantalones del novio. La señorita Insull llamó al animal chascando los dedos y luego se inclinó y lo acarició. ¡Un extraño que probaba la validez del descubrimiento de Charles Critchlow de que en María Insull estaba enterrado un ser humano!

La señorita Insull estaba tan cerca de los cuarenta como se pueda uno imaginar. Llevaba veinticinco años trabajando en la tienda, pasando cosa de doce horas diarias en ella, asistiendo con regularidad a la capilla wesleyana y a la escuela dominical y durmiendo en casa de su madre, a la que mantenía. Nunca había ganado más de treinta chelines a la semana y sin embargo su situación era considerada excepcionalmente buena. En la eterna penumbra de la tienda había ido perdiendo las características y encantos propios de su sexo que una vez poseyera. Era tan delgada y lisa como el propio Charles Critchlow. Era como si su seno hubiera sufrido una permanente sequía en una vulnerable época de desarrollo y nunca se hubiese recuperado. La única prueba de que corría sangre por sus venas era la calidad granulosa de su arruinado cutis; los granos de aquella superficie de color de ladrillo ponían de manifiesto que la sangre era floja y mala. Sus pies y sus manos eran grandes y desmañados; la piel de los dedos se había vuelto basta por el áspero contacto con la textura del papel de lija. Seis días a la semana vestía de negro; el séptimo una especie de discreto alivio de luto. Era honrada, capaz e industriosa; más allá de los límites de sus ocupaciones no tenía curiosidad alguna, ni inteligencia, ni ideas. Las supersticiones y los prejuicios, profundos y arrebatados, ocupaban en ella el lugar de las ideas, pero era incomparable vendiendo sedas, gorritos, tirantes y hule; en anchuras, longitudes y precios jamás se equivocaba; nunca irritaba a un cliente ni prometía estúpidamente lo que no era posible hacer, ni era impuntual, descuidada ni irrespetuosa. Nadie sabía nada de ella, pues no había nada que saber. Si se restaba de ella a la dependienta no quedaba nada. Ignorante y espiritualmente muerta, sólo existía por hábito.

Pero para Charles Critchlow era una ilusión. Le había echado una mirada y había visto juventud, inocencia, virginidad. Durante ocho años, la polilla Charles había revoloteado en torno a su lámpara luminosa y ahora se había chamuscado y no tenía escapatoria. Podía tratarla con el aire de indiferencia que quisiera; podía no hacerle ni caso en público; podía hablar brutalmente de las mujeres; podía tenerla meses seguidos preguntándose qué quería decir, pero del conjunto de su conducta se deducía indiscutiblemente el hecho de que la quería. La deseaba; ella lo tenía encantado: era un ornamento y un lujo por el que estaba dispuesto a pagar... y a hacer locuras. Era viudo desde antes de que ella naciera; para él era una chiquilla. Todo es relativo en este mundo. En cuanto a ella, era demasiado indolente para rechazarlo. ¿Por qué iba a rechazarlo? Las ostras no rechazan.

—Por supuesto, les felicito a los dos —musitó Constanza, dándose cuenta de la trascendencia de las lacónicas palabras del señor Critchlow—, Por supuesto, espero que sean felices.

—Todo irá bien —dijo el señor Critchlow.

—Gracias, señora Povey —añadió María Insull.

Al parecer nadie sabía qué más decir. «Es muy repentino», fueron las palabras que tuvo Constanza en la punta de la lengua, pero no llegó a pronunciarlas porque eran visiblemente absurdas.

—¡Ah! —exclamó el señor Critchlow, como considerando de nuevo la situación él mismo.

La señorita Insull dio una última palmadita al perro.

—Así pues, todo está arreglado —dijo el señor Critchlow—, Y bien, señora, usted quiere dejar la tienda, ¿verdad?

—No estoy muy segura de eso —respondió Constanza con inquietud.

—¡No me diga! —protestó él— Claro que quiere dejarla.

—He vivido aquí toda mi vida —dijo Constanza.

—No ha vivido en la tienda toda la vida. Dije la tienda. ¡Escuche! —prosiguió—. Voy a hacerle una proposición. Puede conservar la casa y yo me quedaré con la tienda. ¿Y bien? —La miró inquisitivamente.

A Constanza la desconcertó la brusquedad de la propuesta, que además no comprendía.

—Pero ¿cómo...? —balbuceó.

—Venga —dijo con impaciencia el señor Critchlow, acercándose a la puerta de la casa, detrás de la caja.

—Que vaya ¿adonde? ¿Qué quiere? —interrogó Constanza.

—¡Aquí! —dijo el señor Critchlow cada vez más impaciente—. Sígame ¿quiere?

Constanza obedeció. La señorita Insull siguió sigilosamente a Constanza y el perro a la señorita Insull. El señor Critchlow entró por la puerta y fue pasillo adelante hasta después del taller de cortar, a su derecha. El pasillo torcía después en ángulo recto a la izquierda y terminaba en la puerta de la sala; a la izquierda estaba la escalera de la cocina.

El señor Critchlow se detuvo justo antes de llegar a ella y extendió los brazos, tocando las paredes a ambos lados.

—¡Aquí! —dijo, dando golpecitos en las paredes con sus huesudos nudillos—. ¡Aquí! Imagine que le tapiamos esto y lo mismo la escalera entre el entresuelo y el pasillo del dormitorio, y ya tiene su casa para usted. Dice que ha vivido aquí toda la vida. Bueno, ¿qué le va a impedir terminar aquí? No se trata —añadió —más que de volver a convertir en dos casas lo que en tiempos fueron dos casas, antes de que usted naciera, señora.

—¿Y la tienda? —exclamó Constanza.

—Puede vendernos las existencias conforme a tasación.

Constanza comprendió de golpe el plan. El señor Critchlow seguiría siendo farmacéutico, mientras la señora Critchlow se convertía en jefa del primer negocio de modas de la ciudad. Sin duda practicarían un agujero en el muro de separación del otro lado, para compensar que se tapiase aquél. Seguramente lo tenían todo pensado al detalle. Constanza se rebeló.

—¡Ya! —dijo, un tanto desdeñosamente—. ¿Y mi buena voluntad? ¿La tomará también conforme a tasación?

El señor Critchlow miró al ser por el cual estaba dispuesto a gastar miles de libras. Podría haber sido una Friné y él un estúpido encaprichado. La miró como si dijera «Lo esperábamos, y es hasta aquí donde acordamos que había que llegar».

—¡Sí! —dijo a Constanza—. Muéstreme su buena voluntad. Envuélvala en papel y la tomaré conforme a tasación. ¡Pero no antes, señora! ¡No antes! Le estoy haciendo una oferta muy buena. Veinte libras al año y le dejo la casa. Y me quedo con las existencias conforme a tasación. Piénselo, muchacha.

Una vez dicho lo que tenía que decir, Charles Critchlow se marchó, según su costumbre. Desapareció sin ceremonia por la puerta lateral y, con el delantal ondeando al viento, volvió la esquina de King Street y entró en la Plaza y en su tienda, que no guardaba la media vacación del jueves. La señorita Insull salió poco después.

III

El orgullo de Constanza la apremiaba a rechazar la oferta. Pero lo cierto era que su única objeción consistía en que el plan no había sido idea suya. Por lo demás, dicho plan reconciliaba su deseo de permanecer en la casa con su deseo de librarse de la tienda.

—¡Haré que me abra una ventana nueva en la sala..., una ventana que se pueda abrir! —dijo decididamente a Cyril, que aceptó la propuesta del señor Critchlow con indiferencia fatalista.

Tras llegar a un acuerdo sobre la nueva ventana, cerró el trato. Después vino el inventario, que llevó semanas. Y luego fue el carpintero y tomó las medidas para la ventana. Y fueron un constructor y un albañil e inspeccionaron las entradas, y Constanza tuvo la sensación de que había llegado el fin. Quitó la alfombra de la sala y protegió los muebles con fundas. Ella y Cyril vivieron veinte días entre tablas y fundas; ni el carpintero ni el albañil volvieron a aparecer. Después, un día, por sorpresa, dos obreros del carpintero quitaron la ventana vieja; a media tarde el carpintero trajo la nueva y los tres estuvieron trabajando hasta las diez de la noche colocándola. Cyril llevaba la gorra puesta y se fue a la cama con ella puesta; Constanza llevaba un chal Paisley. Un pintor se comprometió, más allá de toda posibilidad de fracaso, a pintar la ventana por la mañana. Tenía que empezar a las seis; el despertador de Amy fue modificado de manera que pudiera estar levantada y vestida para franquearle la entrada. Fue una semana después, dio una capa de pintura y desapareció otros diez días.

Después aparecieron de repente dos albañiles con pesadas herramientas y se quedaron horrorizados al ver que no estaba todo preparado para ellos. (Después de tres semanas sin alfombra, Constanza había vuelto a ponerla.) Arrancaron el papel de la pared, lanzaron cascadas de yeso por la escalera de la cocina, quitaron a capricho hiladas de ladrillos de las paredes y, ahítos de destrucción, se apresuraron a marcharse. Al cabo de cuatro días empezaron a llegar nuevos ladrillos rojos, acarreados por un peón totalmente inocente que no había visitado la casa con anterioridad. Al peón le cayó toda la tempestad de la ira de Constanza. No era una ira feroz sino por el contrario bienhumorada, pero el peón se quedó impresionado.

—Hace un mes que no se puede vivir en esta casa —dijo para terminar—. Si mañana no están esos tabiques, los de arriba y los de abajo, ¡mañana, fíjese bien!, que no se atreva ninguno de ustedes a dejarse ver por aquí porque no pienso dejarles entrar. Muy bien, ha traído esos ladrillos. ¡Ahora lárguese y dígale a su jefe lo que le he dicho!

Fue efectivo. Al día siguiente despertaron a la casa unos obreros sometidos y convincentes llamando a la puerta exactamente a las seis y media y las dos puertas fueron tapiadas poco a poco. Lo curioso fue que, cuando la barrera se alzaba ya a un pie en el piso bajo, Constanza se acordó de algunas pequeñas posesiones que no había sacado del taller de corte. Recogiéndose las faldas pasó por encima, entró en unas regiones que ya no eran suyas y regresó con las cosas. Llevaba un pañuelo en la cabeza para proteger el cabello del polvo. Estaba muy ocupada, muy pendiente de naderías. No tenía tiempo para sentimentalismos. Sin embargo, cuando los hombres llegaron a la hilada más alta y quedaron finalmente ocultos tras su propia construcción y ya no pudo ver más que cal y canto, se sintió desconcertantemente dominada por una ceguera neblinosa y no pudo ver ni siquiera cal y canto. Cyril se la encontró, con su absurdo pañuelo en la cabeza, llorando en una mecedora cubierta con una funda en la sagrada sala. Silbó con inquietud y observó:

—Oye, mamá, ¿y el té? —y después, oyendo las pesadas voces de los obreros, que estaban arriba, corrió allí con alivio. El té se había servido en el salón; se alegró al saberlo por Amy, que le informó también de que ella «nunca se acostumbraría a las paredes nuevas esas», en toda su vida.

Aquella tarde se fue a la Escuela de Arte. Constanza, sola, no sabía qué hacer. Antes deseaba que se levantaran los tabiques y se levantaron; pero tendrían que pasar días hasta que se enlucieran, y después del enlucido más días aún hasta que se empapelaran. Tal vez faltara todavía un mes para que su casa quedara libre de obreros y preparada para sus propios trabajos. No podía hacer otra cosa que sentarse en cualquier montón de polvo, contemplar los estragos del cambio y aguantarse las lágrimas todo lo que pudiera. Las transacciones legales estaban casi concluidas; en los mostradores de la tienda había, a disposición de los clientes, cartelitos que anunciaban el traspaso del negocio. Al cabo de dos días Charles Critchlow pagaría el precio de un deseo realizado. Se cubrió de pintura la muestra y se trazaron con tiza nuevas letras encima. En el futuro, Constanza se vería obligada, si quería entrar en la tienda, a hacerlo como clienta y desde el frente. Sí; veía que, aunque la casa siguiera siendo suya, la raíz de su vida había sido arrancada.

¡Y qué revoltijo! ¡Parecía inconcebible que se pudiera poner orden en aquel revoltijo material!

Sin embargo, antes de que los campos del condado empezaran a cubrirse de nieve aquel invierno ya sólo quedaba una señal de aquella devastadora revolución: un trozo de papel de pared que se había encolado demasiado pronto y no se pegaba. María Insull era María Critchlow. Constanza había salido a la Plaza a ver la muestra modificada y el gusto de la señora Critchlow en cuanto a cortinas, y había visto también —lo más impresionante de todo— que la mugrienta ventana de la habitación abandonada de lo alto de la escalera abandonada, junto a su dormitorio de niña y adolescente, estaba limpia y le habían puesto una tabla delante. Sabía que aquel cuarto, en el que ella misma no había entrado nunca, iba a ser utilizado como almacén, pero la prueba visible de su conversión la afectó de un modo tan extraño que no se sintió capaz de entrar con

osadía en la tienda, como había pensado, y hacer algunas compras en plan amistoso. «¡Soy una tonta!», murmuró. Después se aventuró a entrar en la tienda, con tímida brusquedad, y fue recibida con la adecuada ceremonia por la señora Critchlow (tan reseca como siempre), quien insistió en hacerle el descuento comercial especial. Y se llevó sus pequeñas compras amistosas, dando la vuelta para entrar por su puerta, la de King Street. ¡Un acontecimiento en verdad trivial! Constanza, sin saber si reír o llorar, hizo las dos cosas. Se acusó de estar desarrollando una facilidad histérica para llorar y luchó sabiamente contra ella.

Capítulo VIII

UNA MADRE MUY ORGULLOSA

I

En 1893 había un hombre nuevo y extraño viviendo en el número 4 de la Plaza de San Lucas. Mucha gente reparó en dicho fenómeno. En Bursley se habían visto antes muy pocos de su estilo. Una de las cosas que sorprendían de él era la compleja manera en que se protegía por medio de centelleantes cadenas. Una cadena le cruzaba el chaleco, pasando por un ojal especial, sin botón, que había en el medio. A este cable estaban firmemente sujetos un reloj a un extremo y un estuche para lápiz en el otro; la cadena servía también como protección contra un ladrón que intentara arrebatarle el chaleco de fantasía en su totalidad. Luego había otras cadenas más largas debajo del chaleco, en parte destinadas, sin duda, a desviar balas, pero servían principalmente para permitir al propietario izar cortaplumas, petacas, cajas de cerillas y llaveros de las profundidades de los bolsillos de los pantalones. Una parte esencial de los tirantes de aquel hombre, visible a veces cuando jugaba al tenis, se componía de una cadena, y la mitad superior y la inferior de sus gemelos estaban unidas por cadenas. De vez en cuando se le veía encadenado a un perro.

¡Un retroceso a un tipo medieval, posiblemente! ¡Sí, pero también un ejemplar de lo excesivamente moderno! Exteriormente era una consecuencia del hecho de que, años antes, el principal sastre de Bursley permitió a su hijo ir de aprendiz a Londres. El padre murió; el hijo tuvo el buen juicio de volver y labrarse una fortuna al tiempo que creaba un nuevo tipo en la ciudad, un tipo del cual las múltiples cadenas no eran más que una característica y ésa la menos costosa si bien la más llamativa. Por ejemplo, hasta el histórico año en que el joven sastre creó el tipo, todas las gorras eran gorras en Bursley y todos los cuellos eran cuellos. Pero a partir de entonces ninguna gorra fue gorra y ningún cuello fue cuello a menos que se ajustara con exactitud en forma y material a ciertas sagradas gorras y cuellos que el joven sastre guardaba en su trastienda. Nadie sabía por qué aquellas sagradas gorras y cuellos eran sagrados, pero lo eran; su sacralidad duró unos seis meses y luego, repentinamente —tampoco supo nadie por qué— cayeron de su elevada posición y quedaron más bajo que despojos para perros, siendo suplantados en el altar. El tipo al que había dado vida el joven sastre había de ser reconocido por sus gorras y sus cuellos, y de una manera similar por cualquier otra pieza de atuendo con excepción de las botas. Por desgracia, el sastre no vendía botas, de modo que no impuso a sus criaturas ningún credo místico en lo tocante a botas. Fue una lástima, pues daba la casualidad de que los fabricantes de botas de la época no estaban inflamados por la pasión de crear tipos, como lo estaba el sastre, de manera que el nuevo tipo acababa súbitamente en los bajos de los pantalones del sastre.

El hombre del número 4 de la Plaza de San Lucas tenía unos pies relativamente pequeños y estrechos, lo cual le otorgaba una ventaja; y como estaba dotado de cierta vaga distinción física general consiguió, a pesar del eterno desorden de sus cabellos, destacar dentro del tipo. Indudablemente, el verlo a menudo en su casa halagaba el orgullo de los ojos de Constanza, que se posaban en él casi siempre con placer. Había entrado en la casa de manera sorprendentemente repentina poco después de que Cyril terminara el colegio y estaba contratado como aprendiz con el dibujante jefe de Peel, la clásica manufactura de vajilla. La presencia de un hombre en su morada desconcertaba un poco a Constanza al principio, pero pronto se acostumbró a él, dándose cuenta de que un hombre se comportaría como un hombre y había que suponer que así sería. Aquel hombre, ciertamente, hacía lo que quería en todos los aspectos. Como Cyril siempre les había parecido a sus padres muy corpulento, se podía esperar hallar un gigante en el nuevo hombre, pero, extrañamente, era delgado y de estatura un poco inferior a la media. Ni en corpulencia ni en muchos otros detalles se parecía al Cyril al que había suplantado. Sus gestos eran más ligeros y rápidos; no tenía nada del desmaño de Cyril, no tenía el gusto sin límites de Cyril por los dulces ni su tremendo odio a los guantes, los barberos y el jabón. Era mucho más soñador que Cyril y estaba mucho más atareado. En realidad Constanza sólo lo veía a las horas de las comidas. Durante el día estaba en Peel y todas las tardes iba a la Escuela de Arte. Soñaba incluso durante las comidas y, sin decirlo, daba la impresión de ser el hombre más atareado de Bursley, envuelto en sus ocupaciones y preocupaciones como en una manta: una manta que a Constanza le costaba trabajo penetrar.

Constanza deseaba complacerlo; no vivía sino para complacerlo; no obstante él era extremadamente difícil de complacer, en absoluto porque fuera exigente e hipercrítico sino porque era indiferente. Constanza, a fin de satisfacer su deseo de complacer, tenía que hacer cincuenta esfuerzos con la esperanza de que por casualidad reparase en uno. Era un hombre bueno, asombrosamente ingenioso... una vez que Constanza lo

había sacado de la cama por la mañana; no tenía vicios; era amable, salvo cuando Constanza trataba equivocadamente de contrariarle; encantador, con una curiosa vena humorística que Constanza comprendía sólo a medias. Constanza, sin lugar a dudas, presumía mucho de él y sinceramente hallaba en él pocas cosas que pudiera criticar. De vez en cuando, con sus suaves y elegantes chanzas, parecía redescubrirla, como si dijese «¡Ah! ¿Entonces todavía estás ahí?». Constanza no pudo aproximarse a él en el plano en el que estaban sus intereses; él nunca conoció la apasionada intensidad de su absorción en aquella parte menor de su vida que residía en el plano en que estaba ella. Nunca le preocupó su soledad ni sospechó que con arrojarle una sonrisa y una palabra en la cena la estaba compensando exiguamente por tres horas meciéndose solitaria en una mecedora.

Lo peor era que no había curación para ella. Ninguna experiencia bastaría para curarla de su manía de estar siempre esperando que él reparase en cosas en las que jamás reparaba. Un día le dijo él, en medio de un silencio:

—Por cierto, ¿no dejó papá alguna caja de cigarros?

Ella subió la escalera, entró en su habitación y bajó de lo alto del armario la caja que había colocado allí después del funeral. Entregándole la caja estaba haciendo una gran proeza. Tenía diecinueve años y su madre estaba ratificando su precoz hábito de fumar con aquel solemne regalo. Durante algunos días Cyril no hizo caso alguno de la caja. Constanza le preguntó tímidamente:

—¿Has probado aquellos cigarros?

—Todavía no —replicó—. Los probaré un día de éstos.

Diez días después, un domingo que casualmente no salió con su aristocrático amigo Matthew Peel-Swynnerton, abrió por fin la caja y cogió un cigarro.

—Bien —observó con picardía, cortando el cigarro—; ¡ahora veremos, señora Plover!

A menudo la llamaba «señora Plover» en broma. Aunque a ella le agradaba que tuviera el suficiente interés por ella como para tomarle el pelo, no le gustaba que la llamara «señora Plover» y nunca dejaba de decir: «No soy la señora Plover». Cyril se fumó el cigarro despaciosamente, en la mecedora, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás y lanzando columnas de humo al techo. Y luego observó:

—No estaban mal los cigarros del viejo.

—¿Sí? —respondió ácidamente, como si le molestara aquella fácil condescendencia. Pero en secreto estaba encantada. En el veredicto favorable de su hijo acerca de los cigarros de su esposo hubo algo que la entusiasmó.

Y lo contempló. ¡Era imposible no ver en él algún parecido con su padre! ¡Oh! ¡Era un ser mucho más brillante, más avanzado, más complejo, más seductor que su hogareño padre! ¡Y sin embargo...! De vivir su padre, ¿qué habría ocurrido entre ellos? ¿Fumaría cigarros sin disimulo en casa a los diecinueve años?

Constanza se interesaba, en la medida que él se lo permitía, por sus estudios y producciones artísticas. Un ático de la parte de atrás, en el segundo piso, había sido transformado en estudio, un desnudo apartamento que olía a aceite y a arcilla húmeda. Muchas veces había huellas de arcilla en la escalera. Para trabajar con arcilla exigió a su madre un blusón, y ella le hizo un blusón tomando como modelo un blusón auténtico que consiguió a través de una mujer del campo que vendía huevos y mantequilla en el mercado cubierto. Se pasó una semana haciendo en los hombros del blusón un bordado de fantasía que había sacado de un antiguo libro de labores. Cierto día, cuando la había estado viendo bordar el blusón mañana, mediodía y tarde, Cyril dijo a su madre, que estaba meciéndose sin hacer nada después de cenar:

—No te habrás olvidado del blusón que te pedí, ¿verdad, mamá?

Ella sabía que estaba de broma, pero, aunque se daba perfecta cuenta de lo estúpida que era, siempre actuaba como si aquella guasa suya fuese en serio; volvió a coger el blusón, que estaba en el sofá. Cuando estuvo terminado, el joven lo examinó detenidamente y luego exclamó con aire de sorpresa:

—¡Diantre! ¡Qué hermoso! ¿De dónde has sacado ese dibujo?

No dejaba de mirarlo atentamente, con una sonrisa de placer.

Volvió las desgarradas hojas del libro de bordados con el mismo asombro ingenuo y fascinado y se

llevó el libro al estudio.

—Tengo que enseñárselo a Swynnerton —dijo.

A ella, el calificativo de «hermoso» le pareció un raro epíteto para un sencillo ejemplar de honrada labor hecha siguiendo un modelo, y además un punto que conocía de toda su vida. La cuestión era que cada vez entendía menos el «arte» de su hijo. La única decoración de las paredes del estudio era una estampa japonesa que la sorprendía por ser enteramente ridícula, considerada como cuadro. Prefería con mucho aquellos primeros dibujos suyos de rosas y castillos pintorescos, cosas que él despreciaba ahora sin misericordia. Más adelante la descubrió cortando otro blusón.

—¿Para qué es eso? —inquirió.

—Bueno —dijo ella—, no puedes arreglártelas con un solo blusón. ¿Qué harás cuando ése se mande a lavar?

—¡A lavar! No hace falta mandarlo a lavar.

—¡Cyril! —replicó su madre—, ¡No me agotes la paciencia! Estaba pensando hacerte media docena.

Él dejó escapar un silbido.

—¿Con todos esos bordados? —preguntó, sorprendido de semejante empeño.

—¿Por qué no? —respondió ella. En su juventud ninguna costurera hacía menos de media docena de lo que fuera, y por lo general una docena; a veces se llegaba a media docena de docenas.

—Caramba —murmuró el joven—; tienes valor, ya lo creo.

Cosas así sucedían siempre que él se mostraba complacido. Si decía de un plato, en el dialecto local, «Ya podría yo con una pizca de esto» o simplemente se relamía, lo hartaba de aquel plato.

II

Un caluroso día de agosto, justo antes de que se fueran a pasar un mes en la Isla de Man, Cyril llegó a casa pálido y sudando y se dejó caer en el sofá. Llevaba un traje de alpaca gris y, con excepción del pelo, que además de revuelto estaba empapado en sudor, era una obra maestra de esbelta elegancia a pesar del calor. Dejó escapar un gran suspiro y apoyó la cabeza en el brazo del sofá, cubierto con un tapete.

—Bueno, mamá —dijo con voz de fingida calma—. Lo he conseguido. —Tenía la mirada clavada en el techo.

—¿El qué?

—La Beca Nacional. Swynnerton dice que ha sido por pura chiripa. Pero lo he conseguido. ¡Es una gran gloria para la Escuela de Arte de Bursley!

—¿La Beca Nacional? —dijo Constanza—, ¿Qué es eso? ¿Qué es?

—¡Pero, mamá! —la reconvino, no sin irritación—, ¡No irás a decir que no he dicho nunca una palabra de ello!

Encendió un cigarrillo para ocultar su timidez, pues se daba cuenta de que su madre estaba entrando en un terreno desconocido.

Lo cierto era que jamás, ni siquiera con la muerte de su marido, había recibido un golpe tan terrible como el que Cyril, el soñador, le acababa de dar.

No era del todo una sorpresa, pero casi. En efecto, unos meses antes Cyril había mencionado, de pasada como era su costumbre, la cuestión de la Beca Nacional. A propósito de una copa que había diseñado dijo que el director de la Escuela de Arte había sugerido que era lo bastante bueno como para competir por la

Nacional y que, como por lo demás estaba en condiciones de competir, igual podía enviar la copa a South Kensington. Añadió que Peel-Swynnerton se había reído de la idea por considerarla ridícula. En aquella ocasión, Constanza comprendió que una Beca Nacional suponía residir en Londres. Tendría que haber empezado a vivir atemorizada, pues Cyril tenía el molesto hábito de hacer una mera referencia a asuntos que juzgaba muy importantes y que absorbían buena parte de su atención. Era reservado por naturaleza; la rigidez del gobierno de su padre había desarrollado este rasgo de su carácter. Pero la realidad era que había hablado del concurso tan de pasada que a ella no le había costado mucho desecharla pensando que suponía una contingencia tan remota que bien podía dejarla de lado. Verdaderamente, casi lo había olvidado. Sólo de tarde en tarde se había despertado en ella un sordo dolor pasajero, como el anuncio de una enfermedad fatal. Y, como si estuviese en la fase inicial de la enfermedad, se había apresurado a tranquilizarse: «¡Qué tonta soy! ¡Esto no puede ser nada grave!».

Y ahora estaba condenada. Lo sabía. Sabía que no había apelación. Sabía que le daría lo mismo suplicar misericordia a un tigre que a su excelente, ingenioso y soñador hijo.

—Es una libra a la semana —dijo Cyril, su cortedad aumentada por el silencio de su madre y por la espantosa expresión de su rostro—, Y, por supuesto, enseñanza gratuita.

—¿Por cuánto tiempo?

—Bueno... —repuso—. Eso depende. Teóricamente por un año. Pero si uno se porta se prolonga siempre por tres años.

Si se quedaba allí tres años ya no volvería: esto era una certidumbre.

¡Cómo se rebeló, furiosa y desesperada, contra la fortuita crueldad de las cosas! Estaba segura de que hasta entonces no había pensado en serio en irse a Londres. Pero el hecho de que el gobierno lo admitiera en sus aulas gratuitamente y además le diera una libra a la semana le obligaba en cierto modo a irse a Londres. No era la falta de medios lo que le había impedido ir. ¿Por qué, entonces, el tenerlos le iba a inducir a ir? No había ninguna razón lógica. Todo aquello era desastrosamente absurdo. El profesor de arte del Instituto Wedgwood había sugerido por casualidad, sólo por casualidad, que se enviase la copa a South Kensington. ¡Y la consecuencia de aquel capricho era que ella estaba sentenciada a la soledad para toda su vida! ¡Era de una maldad demasiado monstruosa, demasiado increíble!

¡Con qué vana y amarga deprecación murmuró en su corazón la palabra «si»! ¡Si no se hubiesen fomentado las aficiones infantiles de Cyril! ¡Si se hubiera contentado con seguir el oficio de su padre! ¡Si ella se hubiera negado rotundamente a firmar su contrato de aprendizaje en Peel y a pagar la prima! ¡Si no hubiese dejado el color para dedicarse a la arcilla! ¡Si el maestro de arte no hubiera tenido la idea «fatal»! ¡Si los jueces del concurso hubiesen tomado otra decisión! ¡Si hubiera educado a Cyril en el hábito de la obediencia, sacrificando la paz temporal a la seguridad permanente!

Pues, al fin y al cabo, no podía abandonarla sin su consentimiento. No era mayor de edad. Y necesitaría mucho más dinero, que no podía obtener de nadie más que de ella. Podía negarse... ¡No! No podía negarse. Era el amo, el tirano. ¡Por la paz cotidiana había cedido débilmente al principio! Se había portado mal con ella misma y con él. Estaba mimado. Ella lo había mimado. Y él estaba a punto de pagarle con la desdicha para toda la vida y nada le haría apartarse de su camino. ¡La conducta habitual de los hijos mimados! ¿Acaso no la había visto en otras familias y no había moralizado sobre ello?

—¡No parece que te alegre mucho, mamá! —dijo Cyril.

Constanza salió de la habitación. Aunque trataba de disimularla, la alegría del joven al pensar en alejarse de las Cinco Ciudades, de ella, era mucho más manifiesta de lo que pudo soportar.

La *Señal* publicó al día siguiente un artículo especial sobre la noticia. Al parecer no se había concedido una Beca Nacional en las Cinco Ciudades desde hacía once años. Se exhortaba a los ciudadanos a recordar que el señor Povey había obtenido el éxito en concurso abierto con los estudiantes más dotados de todo el país, y en una rama del arte cuyo cultivo no había emprendido hasta época reciente; y, además, que el gobierno ofrecía solamente ocho becas cada año. El nombre de Cyril Povey iba de boca en boca. Y nadie que se encontrara con Constanza, en la calle o en una tienda, podía resistir la tentación de comunicarle que debía sentirse orgullosa como madre de tener un hijo como aquél, pero que en realidad no era una sorpresa... ¡y qué orgulloso habría estado su pobre padre! Algunos, comprensivos, insinuaban que el orgullo maternal era uno de esos lujos que pueden costar demasiado caros.

A ella, por supuesto, se le estropearon las vacaciones en la Isla de Man. Casi no podía ni andar por el peso de una masa de plomo que llevaba en el pecho. Hasta los días más alegres estaba allí aquella masa. Además, estaba muy gruesa. En circunstancias normales habrían pasado allí más de un mes. Un alumno en aprendizaje no está atado a la rueda como un aprendiz corriente. Además, los contratos de aprendizaje iban a ser cancelados. Pero Constanza no tenía deseos de continuar allí. Tenía que preparar la marcha de Cyril a Londres. Tenía que disponer la leña para su propio martirio.

En estos preparativos hizo gala de tanta necedad, reveló tan completa falta de perspectiva como hubiera podido desear el hijo con más ínfulas de superioridad para convertirlos en blanco de una afectuosa ironía. Su preocupación por las nimiedades sin importancia alguna era digna de las mejores tradiciones de la maternidad cariñosa. Sin embargo, la despreocupada sátira de Cyril no le hizo ningún efecto salvo enfadarla en una ocasión, cosa que a él le sorprendió mucho; con total acierto y sabiduría atribuyó aquel estallido sin precedentes a su tensión nerviosa y se lo perdonó. Fue de gran ayuda para que Cyril se trasladara a Londres sin problemas el hecho de que el joven Peel-Swynnerton conociera la capital; tenía un hermano en Chelsea, sabía de alojamientos respetables, era realmente una enciclopedia de la ciudad e iba a pasar en ella parte del otoño. De no ser así, los preliminares en los que su madre habría insistido recurriendo a las lágrimas y a la histeria hubieran resultado quizá fatigosos para Cyril.

Llegó el día en que faltaba una semana justa para la partida de Cyril. Constanza simulaba constantemente animación para enfrentarse a ello. Dijo:

—¿Y si fuera contigo?

El joven sonrió como admitiendo que como broma valía. Y luego ella sonrió en el mismo sentido, apresurándose a mostrar su acuerdo en que como broma no estaba mal.

Aquella última semana fue muy leal a su sastre. Muchos jóvenes habrían encargado trajes nuevos después de llegar a Londres, no antes. Pero Cyril tenía fe en su creador.

El día de la marcha, la familia, la casa misma, se hallaba en un estado de gran excitación. Tenía que salir temprano. No quiso oír hablar de que su madre lo acompañara hasta Knype, donde la línea circular enlazaba con la principal. Podía ir a la estación de Bursley y no más. Cuando ella se rebeló, Cyril dejó ver una mínima indicación de su lado entre hosco y grosero y Constanza cedió inmediatamente. En el desayuno no lloró, pero la expresión de su rostro le hizo protestar:

—¡Escucha, mamá, piensa una cosa! Trata de recordar que vendré para navidad. Apenas son tres meses —y encendió un cigarrillo.

Constanza no respondió.

Amy bajó a rastras un saco Gladstone por la retorcida escalera. Ya había cerca de la puerta un baúl que había arrugado la alfombra y descolocado la estera.

—No te habrás olvidado de meter el cepillo del pelo, ¿verdad, Amy? —preguntó Cyril.

—N-no, señor Cyril —balbuceó ella.

—¡Amy! —la reconvino Constanza con dureza mientras Cyril corría escaleras arriba—. Me sorprende que no sea capaz de hacer mejor las cosas.

Amy se disculpó débilmente. Aunque la trataban casi como si fuese de la familia, no debía haber olvidado que era una sirvienta. ¿Qué derecho tenía ella a llorar al ver el equipaje de Cyril? Se hizo esta pregunta en el tono de Constanza.

Llegó el coche. Cyril bajó a zancadas, con exagerada despreocupación, y también con exagerada despreocupación bromeó con el cochero.

—¡Bueno, mamá! —exclamó cuando se hubo subido el equipaje—, ¡No querrás que pierda el tren! —Pero sabía que había un amplio margen de tiempo. ¡Le resultaba divertido!

—¡No, si ya estoy! —dijo ella, colocándose el gorrito—. Amy, en cuanto nos hayamos ido puede recoger la mesa.

Subió pesadamente al coche.

—¡Hala! ¡Has chafado las ballestas! —le tomó el pelo Cyril.

El caballo se llevó un buen latigazo para que se acordara de lo seria que es la vida. Era una espléndida y tonificante mañana de otoño y el cochero sentía la necesidad de comunicar su abundante energía a alguien o a algo. Partieron; Amy se quedó contemplándolos desde la puerta. Todo se había organizado tan maravillosamente bien que llegaron a la estación veinte minutos antes de que llegase el tren.

—¡Da igual! —consoló socarronamente Cyril a su madre—. Tú prefieres llegar veinte minutos antes mejor que un minuto tarde, ¿no?

Su buen humor tenía que salir por alguna parte.

Fueron transcurriendo los minutos y en el desierto andén de color pizarra fueron apareciendo personas para quienes el tren no era más que un tren circular, personas que tomaban el tren todos los días laborables de su vida y conocían todas sus excentricidades.

Y lo oyeron silbar al salir de Turnhill. Y Cyril cambió una última palabra con el cochero, que estaba a cargo del equipaje. Lucía una apuesta figura y tenía veinte libras en el bolsillo. Cuando regresó junto a Constanza, ésta trataba de no llorar; a través del velo vio sus ojos circundados de rojo. Pero a través del velo ella no veía nada. El tren hizo su entrada en la estación, chirriando hasta detenerse. Constanza se levantó el velo y le dio un beso; se despidió de su vida con un beso. Él percibió el olor de su banda de crespón. Por un instante estuvo cerca de ella, cerca, y pareció como si él tuviese una abrumadora vislumbre de sus secretos; pareció como si lo ahogase la emoción, repentina y poderosa, de aquel crespón. Cyril se sintió extraño.

—¡Aquí tiene, señor! ¡Segunda, fumadores! —llamó el mozo.

Los pasajeros cotidianos del tren lo abordaron con su habitual repugnancia.

—¡Escribiré en cuanto llegue! —dijo Cyril *motu proprio.* Fue lo mejor que pudo encontrar.

¡Con cuánta gracia se quitó el sombrero!

El tren arrancó, produciendo nubes de vapor; Constanza se quedó en el muerto andén junto a unos recipientes de leche, dos mozos y el bullicioso chico de Smith.

Emprendió el camino a casa, lenta y dolorosamente. La masa de plomo era más pesada que nunca. Y los ciudadanos vieron a la madre más orgullosa de Bursley sola por la calle.

«Al fin y al cabo —discutía, airada y petulante, con su alma—, ¿podías esperar que el chico hiciera otra cosa? Es un buen estudiante, ha tenido un éxito brillante, ¿y va a estar siempre pegado a tus faldas? Eso es ridículo. No es lo mismo que si fuera un holgazán o un mal hijo. Ninguna madre podría tener un hijo mejor. ¡Estaría bueno que se quedara toda la vida en Bursley sólo porque a ti no te gusta que te dejen sola!».

Desgraciadamente, tanto le da a uno discutir con una mula como con su propia alma. Su alma no hacía más que repetir monótonamente: «Ahora soy una vieja solitaria, y a nadie le sirvo para nada. Antaño fui joven y orgullosa. ¡Y es en esto en lo que ha parado mi vida! ¡Esto es el fin!».

Cuando llegó a casa, Amy no había tocado las cosas del desayuno, la alfombra seguía arrugada y la estera descolocada. Y, en la desolada atmósfera de una reacción tras una terrible crisis, fue directamente arriba, entró en la devastada habitación de su hijo y contempló el desorden de la cama en la que había dormido.

Libro III

SOFÍA

Capitulo I

LA FUGA

I

Su vestido, de sobria riqueza, tenia un aire rural, mientras ella esperaba, preparada para salir a la calle, en la habitación del hotel londinense la tarde del día 1 de julio de 1866, pero no había nada de provinciano en aquel bello rostro ni en aquel porte, a un tiempo tímido y altivo; y su anhelante corazón se elevaba por encima de las fronteras geográficas.

Era el Hotel Hatfield, en Salisbury Street, entre el Strand y el río. Calle y hotel han desaparecido en la actualidad, perdidos en los vastos cimientos del Savoy y el Cecil, pero el tipo de Hanfield se conserva, cada vez más decadente, en Jermyn Street. En 1866, con sus oscuros pasillos y retorcidas escaleras, sus velas, sus alfombras y tapicerías, que habían sobrevivido a sus modelos, su estrecho comedor donde un millar de atareadas moscas comen juntas en la única y larga mesa, su atmósfera acre y estancada y su molesta sensación de suciedad escondiéndose por todas partes, destacaba con justicia como un buen hotel moderno medio. La monotonía remendada y senil de la habitación componía un entorno que acentuaba la esplendorosa juventud de Sofía. En él, ella era lo único impoluto.

Se oyó llamar a la puerta, con aparente garbo y alegría. Pero ella pensó: «¡Está casi tan nervioso como yo!». Y en su nerviosismo tosió y trató de recuperar el pleno dominio de sí misma. Había llegado al final el momento que dividiría su vida como una batalla divide la historia de una nación. Su mente, en un instante, retrocedió para recorrer tres meses increíbles.

¡Los subterfugios para recibir y esconder las cartas de Gerald en la tienda y para contestarlas! ¡La duplicidad, mucho más complicada y peligrosa, que cultivó con su majestuosa tía en Axe! ¡Las visitas a la oficina de correos de Axe! ¡Los tres divinos encuentros con Gerald, por la mañana temprano, junto al afluente del canal, en los que le habló de su herencia y de la severidad de su tío Boldero y con un torrente de palabras le hizo ver la perspectiva de una eterna felicidad! ¡Las noches de temor! ¡La repentina y aturdida aquiescencia a su plan y la sensación de universal irrealidad que la obsesionaba! ¡La audaz marcha de casa de su tía, vertiendo sobre ella una cascada de tremendas mentiras! ¡Su consternación en la estación de Knype! ¡Su rubor al pedir un billete para Londres! ¡La mirada irónica y comprensiva del mozo que se hizo cargo de su equipaje! ¡Y luego el estrépito del tren que llegaba! ¡Su consternación de nuevo cuando se encontró con que estaba muy lleno y se metió distraídamente en un compartimento en el que ya había seis personas! Y cuando se abrió otra vez la puerta y llegó la escueta interpelación del revisor: «¿Adonde, por favor? ¿Adonde? ¿Adonde?». Hasta que le tocó el turno a ella: «¿Adonde, señorita?», y su débil y breve respuesta: «Euston». Y después el prolongado e incesante traqueteo del tren en los raíles, al ritmo de la voz que se dejaba oír en su seno y a la que era imposible responder: «¿Por qué estás aquí? ¿Por qué estás aquí?». ¡Y después Rugby, y la terrible prueba de reunirse con Gerald, su entrada en el compartimento, la redistribución de los asientos, y los intentos que hicieron de hablar de cosas intrascendentes delante de los ocupantes del compartimento! (Había tenido la impresión de que aquella parte de la empresa no había sido muy bien ideada por Gerald.) ¡Y por fin Londres; los millares de coches, las fabulosas calles, el fragor general, que superaba todos los sueños, intensificando hasta un grado extraordinario la obsesión de irrealidad, la ilusión de que no podía haber hecho realmente lo que había hecho, de que no estaba haciendo en realidad lo que estaba haciendo!

¡Y, de manera suprema y final, la deliciosa tortura del terror que oprimía su corazón mientras vivía junto a Gerald la imposible aventura! ¿Quién era aquella loca y arrebatada Sofía? ¡Ella no, desde luego!

La llamada a la puerta se repitió, impaciente.

—Adelante —dijo ella tímidamente.

Gerald Scales entró. Sí, debajo de aquel aire de viajante de comercio que ha estado en todas partes y ha visto de todo, estaba muy nervioso. Era la intimidad de Sofía lo que, con el consentimiento de ella, había invadido. Había reservado aquella habitación sólo con el propósito de utilizarla como retiro para Sofía hasta la tarde, en que habían de reanudar sus viajes. No tenía por qué tener un significado perturbador. Pero el simple desorden del lavabo, una toalla tirada sobre una de las sillas de mimbre, le hizo sentir que estaba

ofendiendo su decoro, aumentando su nerviosismo. El momento fue penoso, tan difícil que superaba su habilidad para llevarlo con naturalidad.

Acercándose a ella con fingida desenvoltura, la besó a través del velo, que ella se levantó entonces con un movimiento impulsivo, y la volvió a besar más ardientemente, dándose cuenta de que el ardor de Sofía era mayor que el suyo.

Era la primera vez que estaban a solas desde la fuga de Axe. ¡Y sin embargo, con toda su experiencia mundana, era lo bastante ingenuo como para sorprenderse de no poder poner en su beso todo el calor de la pasión, y se preguntaba por qué el contacto con ella no le estremecía! Con todo, la vigorosa presión de sus labios sobresaltó de alguna manera sus sentidos y también le deleitó con su callada promesa. Percibía el aroma de su velo, de la seda de su corpiño, y, como si ambos estuvieran envueltos en aquellos aromas igual que el cuerpo de Sofía estaba envuelto en sus ropas, el tenue perfume carnal del propio cuerpo de ella. Su rostro, que contemplaba tan cerca de sí que veía la pelusilla casi imperceptible de aquellas mejillas frutales, era asombrosamente bello; los oscuros ojos estaban exquisitamente empañados, y Gerald sentía la secreta lealtad de aquella alma que ascendía hacia él. Era un poco más alta que su amante, pero en cierto modo estaba colgada de él, con el cuerpo echado hacia atrás y el pecho apretado contra el suyo, de modo que él, en vez de alzar los ojos hacia los suyos, los bajaba. Él lo prefería así; aunque estaba perfectamente proporcionado, era muy susceptible en cuanto a su estatura. Al despertarse, sus sentidos le dieron ánimos. Sus temores se desvanecieron y empezó a sentirse muy satisfecho consigo mismo. Había heredado doce mil libras y había conseguido a aquel ser único. Era su presa; la retuvo junto a sí, escudriñando las minucias de su piel y arrugando sus finas sedas con su aquiescencia. Algo en él la había obligado a dejar su pudor en el altar de su deseo. Y el sol brilló, luminoso. Así pues, la besó con mayor ardor y con un ligerísimo adarme de la condescendencia propia de un vencedor; la ardiente respuesta de la joven le devolvió sobradamente la seguridad en sí mismo que le faltaba.

—Ahora no tengo a nadie más que a ti —musitó Sofía con voz enternecida.

En su ignorancia se imaginó que a él le complacería el que expresara aquel sentimiento. No se daba cuenta de que a un hombre lo que le suele suceder es que se enfría, pues le prueba que en lo que piensa la otra persona es en sus responsabilidades y no en sus privilegios. Indudablemente tranquilizó a Gerald, sin hacerle partícipe del sentido que ella tenía de sus responsabilidades. Sonrió vagamente. Para Sofía, su sonrisa era un milagro continuamente renovado, mezclaba un gallardo regocijo con un toque de súplica nostálgica de una manera que nunca dejaba de hechizar a Sofía. Una muchacha menos inocente que Sofía tal vez hubiera adivinado por aquella adorable sonrisa semifemenina que con Gerald Scales podía hacer cualquier cosa menos confiar en él. Pero Sofía tenía mucho que aprender.

—¿Estás ya? —le preguntó él, poniéndole las manos sobre los hombros y mirándola a aquella distancia.

—Sí —respondió, armándose de valor. Sus caras seguían estando muy juntas.

—Bien, ¿te gustaría ir a ver los grabados de Doré?

¡Una pregunta muy sencilla! ¡Una propuesta afortunada! Doré se estaba haciendo célebre incluso en las Cinco Ciudades, desde luego no por sus ilustraciones para los *Cuentos Droláticos* de Balzac sino por sus escalofriantes extravagancias bíblicas. En los círculos piadosos, Doré estaba salvando al arte del reproche de trivialidad y frivolidad. Era sin duda por parte de Gerald una idea de buen gusto el llevar a su amor aquella tarde estival a contemplar los originales de las estampas que tanto habían impresionado a las Cinco Ciudades. Era una idea que santificaba la profana aventura.

Sin embargo, Sofía daba muestras de aflicción. El color se le iba y se le venía; tragaba saliva con fuerza y tenía todo el cuerpo contraído. Se apartó de él, pero sin dejar de mirarle; tenía los ojos llenos de lágrimas.

—Pero ¿qué hay de..., de la boda? —dijo en voz casi inaudible.

Aquella frase pareció costarle todo su orgullo, pero estaba obligada a formularla y a pagar por ello.

—¡Oh! —exclamó él con ligereza y celeridad, como si acabara de recordarle un detalle que pudiera habérsele olvidado—. Ahora mismo iba a decírtelo. No se puede celebrar aquí. Ha habido un cambio en las normas. No lo supe con certeza hasta anoche, a última hora. Pero he confirmado que será como coser y cantar ante el cónsul inglés en París, y como he sacado los billetes para partir esta noche, como convinimos... —se detuvo.

Sofía se sentó en la silla en la que estaba la toalla, estupefacta. Creyó lo que le decía. No sospechó que

estaba utilizando la clásica estratagema del seductor. ¿Había sido realmente su intención salir de paseo y hacer la observación, como si se le ocurriera en el último momento: *«Por cierto,* no podemos casarnos como te había dicho a las dos y media»? A pesar de su extrema ignorancia e inocencia, Sofía tenía una elevada opinión de su sentido común y de su capacidad para cuidar de sí misma; casi no podía creer que él pretendiera que se fuese París, y de noche, sin estar casada. Parecía lastimosamente juvenil, virginal, inmadura, ingenua; indefensa en medio de espantosos peligros. ¡No obstante, su mente estaba llena de perplejo asombro de ver que la había tomado por una boba confiada! La única explicación posible era que Gerald, en algunas cuestiones, fuese también un bobo confiado. No había reflexionado. No se había dado cuenta lo suficiente del inmenso sacrificio que había hecho al escaparse con él, aun sólo hasta Londres. Lo sintió por él. Tuvo la primera vislumbre de mujer de que era necesario acomodar de alguna manera la perspectiva como preliminar esencial para una felicidad sin interrupciones.

—¡Todo irá bien! —continuó Gerald, en tono persuasivo.

La miró, ya que ella no lo miraba a él. Tenía diecinueve años. Pero le pareció sobremanera madura y misteriosa. Su rostro le desconcertaba; su espíritu era un país extranjero. Puede que en cierto sentido estuviera indefensa, pero era en ella y no en él en quien estaba contenido el destino; el futuro se hallaba en el secreto y caprichoso funcionamiento de aquel espíritu.

—¡Oh, no! —exclamó bruscamente—. ¡Oh, no!

—Oh, no ¿qué?

—No podemos irnos así —dijo ella.

—Pero ¿no te digo que todo irá bien? —protestó él—. ¡Si nos quedamos aquí y vienen siguiéndote...! Además, tengo los billetes y todo.

—¿Por qué no me lo has dicho antes? —inquirió Sofía.

—Pero ¿cómo iba a decírtelo? —rezongó Gerald—, ¿Es que hemos estado un minuto a solas?

Esto era casi cierto. No podían ponerse a discutir las formalidades del matrimonio en el tren atestado de gente, ni durante el precipitado almuerzo con una docena de oídos aguzados en la misma mesa. Se vio allí en terreno seguro.

—Entonces, ¿podemos o no? —la apremió.

—¡Y hablas de ir a ver grabados! —fue su respuesta.

No hay duda de que aquello había sido una gran falta de tacto. Reconoció que había sido una estupidez. Y se sintió molesto por ello, como si fuera ella quien la hubiera cometido y no él.

—Querida mía —dijo, ofendido—, he hecho las cosas lo mejor que he podido. No es culpa mía si se cambian las normas y los funcionarios son idiotas.

—Deberías habérmelo dicho antes —insistió ella hoscamente.

—Pero ¿cómo podía hacerlo?

Gerald casi creía en aquel momento que verdaderamente pretendía casarse con ella y que la ineptitud de la burocracia le había impedido realizar su honorable propósito. No obstante, no había hecho nada en absoluto para efectuar el matrimonio.

—¡Oh, no; oh, no! —repetía ella con la cara larga y los ojos húmedos—¡Oh, no!

Él dedujo que rechazaba su sugerencia de ir a París.

Despacio y muy nervioso se acercó a ella. Sofía no se movió ni levantó la vista, que tenía clavada en el lavabo. Él se inclinó y murmuró:

—Vamos, vamos. Todo irá bien Viajarás en el departamento de señoras del barco.

No se movió. Él se inclinó más y le rozó la nuca con los labios. Y ella se puso en pie de un salto, airada y sollozando. Precisamente porque estaba loca por él lo odiaba ferozmente. Toda ternura había desaparecido.

—¡Te agradeceré que no me toques! —dijo furiosa. Le había dejado besarle los labios un momento antes, pero ahora un roce en la nunca era una ofensa.

Él sonrió con cortedad.

—Sofía, de verdad, tienes que ser razonable —argumentó—. ¿Qué es lo que he hecho?

—¡Es lo que no has hecho, me parece a mí! —gritó ella—. ¿Por qué no me lo dijiste cuando estábamos en el coche?

—No quería que empezaras a preocuparte tan pronto —respondió, lo cual era totalmente cierto.

Lo que había sucedido era que, desde luego, había eludido decirle que no habría boda aquel día. Al no ser un seductor profesional de muchachas, carecía de habilidad para hacer con facilidad una cosa difícil.

—Vamos, escucha, pequeña —prosiguió con un poquitín de impaciencia—. Salgamos y divirtámonos. Te aseguro que todo irá bien en París.

—Eso fue lo que dijiste de Londres —replicó ella sarcásticamente, entre sollozos—. ¡Y mira!

¿Acaso se había imaginado un solo instante que habría ido a Londres con él sino en el entendimiento de que se iban a casar nada más llegar? Aquella actitud indignadamente inquisitiva no podía reconciliarse con su creencia de que sus excusas eran sinceras. Pero ella no reparó en la discrepancia.

Su sarcasmo hirió la vanidad de Gerald.

—¡Oh, muy bien! —murmuró—¡Si prefieres no creer lo que te digo! —Se encogió de hombros.

Ella no dijo nada, pero de vez en cuando su cuerpo era sacudido por un sollozo.

Al ver vacilación en su rostro, él lo intentó de nuevo.

—Vamos, chiquilla. Y sécate los ojos —y se acercó a ella.

—¡No, no! —lo rechazó con pasión. La había valorado en muy poco. Y no le gustaba que la llamaran «chiquilla».

—Entonces ¿qué vas a hacer? —inquirió, en un tono que respiraba a la vez burla e intimidación. Le estaba poniendo en ridículo.

—Puedo decirte lo que no voy a hacer —dijo ella— No voy a ir a París. —Sus sollozos eran menos frecuentes.

—No es eso lo que pregunto —dijo él fríamente— Quiero saber lo que vas a hacer.

Ninguno de los dos trató ya de fingir afecto. A juzgar por su actitud podía creerse que se tuvieran odio recíproco desde la infancia.

—¿Y eso qué tiene que ver contigo? —inquirió Sofía.

—Tiene todo que ver conmigo —dijo él.

—¡Bien, pues vete a averiguarlo! —repuso ella.

Aquello era pueril; era una niñería, poco acorde con los cánones para llevar a cabo una ruptura definitiva, pero no por ello poseía menos trágica seriedad. En realidad, el espectáculo de aquella muchacha comportándose ridículamente como si estuviese en una grave crisis aumentaba lo trágico de la situación aunque no la hiciese más elevada. La idea que se le pasó a Gerald por la cabeza fue lo absurdo y estúpido que era tener que ver con jovencitas. Era totalmente ciego a sus encantos.

—¿Que me vaya? —repitió—. ¿Es eso lo que quieres?

—Por supuesto que eso es lo que quiero —respondió ella con celeridad.

El cobarde que había en él le impulsaba a aprovecharse del orgullo ignorante e impotente de la muchacha y a dejarla tomándole la palabra. Recordó la escena que le había hecho en el pozo y se dijo que su encanto no compensaba su mal genio y que era un estúpido por haber podido siquiera imaginar lo contrario, y

que sería doblemente estúpido si no aprovechaba ahora la oportunidad para retirarse de una empresa descabellada.

—¿Me voy, entonces? —dijo con sorna.

Ella hizo un gesto de asentimiento.

—Desde luego, si me ordenas que te deje tendré que hacerlo. ¿Puedo hacer algo por ti?

Ella hizo un ademán negativo.

—¿Nada? ¿Estás segura?

Sofía frunció el ceño.

—Bien; entonces, adiós. —Se volvió hacia la puerta.

—Me imagino que irás a dejarme sin dinero ni nada —dijo ella con voz fría y cortante. Y su sorna era mucho más destructiva que la de Gerald. Destruyó en él el último resto de compasión por ella.

—¡Oh, te ruego me perdones! —exclamó, y con aire fanfarrón sacó cinco soberanos del cajón de una cómoda.

Sofía se precipitó hacia ellos.

—¿Te crees que voy a coger tu odioso dinero? —gruñó, recogiendo las monedas en su mano enguantada.

Su primer impulso fue tirárselas a la cara, pero se detuvo y luego las arrojó a un rincón de la habitación.

—¡Recógelas! —le ordenó.

—No, gracias —dijo él lacónicamente, y se fue cerrando la puerta.

¡Sólo unos momentos antes estaban enamorados, rebosando ternura en cada gesto, como un perfume! ¡Sólo unos momentos antes ella había decidido telegrafiar condescendientemente a su madre para comunicarle que estaba «muy bien»! Y ahora el sueño estaba totalmente destruido. Y la voz del duro sentido común que hablaba a Sofía en sus humores más disparatados aseveraba con fuerza que aquella empresa nunca podría haber parado en nada bueno, que era desde sus inicios una empresa imposible no atenuada por la menor justificación. ¡Una enorme tontería! ¡Sí; una fuga, pero no como una fuga de verdad, sino irreal! Siempre había sabido que no era más que una imitación de fuga y que tenía que acabar en una terrible desilusión. En realidad nunca había deseado escaparse, pero algo en su interior la aguijoneaba a pesar de sus protestas. Las estrictas ideas de sus parientes de edad eran correctas, al fin y al cabo. Era ella la que estaba equivocada. Y era ella la que tendría que pagar.

«He sido una chica mala», se dijo sombríamente en medio de sus ruinas.

Se enfrentó a los hechos. Pero no se arrepentiría; eso ni pensarlo. No cambiaría los restos de su orgullo por el medio de escapar de la peor desgracia que la vida pudiera traerle. En cuanto a aquello se conocía bien a sí misma. Y se puso manos a la obra para reparar y renovar su orgullo.

Pasara lo que pasara no podía volver a las Cinco Ciudades. No podía, porque había robado dinero a su tía Harriet. Había birlado a su tía una cantidad equivalente a la que le había tirado a la cara a Gerald Scales, pero en la forma de un billete. Un prudente y misterioso instinto la había impulsado a tomar aquella precaución.

Y ahora se alegraba. No hubiera podido lanzar a Gerald aquel desdén si realmente hubiera necesitado dinero. De modo que se regocijó de su delito, aunque, puesto que la tía Harriet descubriría inmediatamente la falta del dinero, dicho delito le impediría para siempre volver con su familia. Jamás, jamás miraría a su madre con los ojos de una ladrona!

(En realidad, la tía Harriet descubrió efectivamente la desaparición del dinero y, lo que dice mucho en su favor, no la reveló a nadie. El saberlo habría sido una nueva puñalada en el corazón de la madre.)

Sofía se alegraba también de haberse negado a proseguir viaje a París. El recuerdo de su firmeza en la

negativa halagaba su vanidad, convenciéndose de que era capaz de cuidar de sí misma. Ir a París sin haberse casado habría sido una locura inimaginable. Sólo pensar en aquella barbaridad hería su susceptibilidad moral. ¡No; Gerald la había tomado por otra clase de chica, por ejemplo, una dependienta o una moza de taberna!

Con este catálogo de satisfacciones concluyó. No tenía ni idea de lo que debía o podía hacer. La mera perspectiva de aventurarse a salir de la habitación la intimidaba. ¿Habría dejado Gerald el baúl de ella en el vestíbulo? Seguro que si. ¡Vaya pregunta! Pero ¿qué le ocurriría a ella? Londres..., Londres la había aturdido. No podía hacer nada sola. Estaba tan indefensa como un conejo en Londres. Descorrió la cortina y echó una mirada hacia el río. Era inevitable que pensara en el suicidio, pues no podía imaginar que hubiera habido jamás una muchacha en una situación más desesperada que la suya. «Podría salir esta noche sin que nadie me viera y ahogarme —pensó seriamente—. ¡Le estaría muy bien empleado a Gerald!».

Después la abrumó la soledad como una tenebrosa medianoche, agotando rápidamente sus fuerzas, desintegrando su orgullo en su espantosa avalancha. Miró en torno suyo como buscando ayuda, como una mujer que estando en la calle siente que está a punto de desmayarse, y fue ciegamente hacia la cama, dejando caer en ella la mitad superior de su cuerpo en una actitud de abandono. Lloró, pero sin sollozos.

II

Gerald Scales caminaba por el Strand, contemplando sus casas altas y estrechas, apretadas unas contra otras como si las hubiera metido allí alguien que no pensara en otra cosa que en ahorrar espacio. Con la excepción de Somerset House, el King's College y uno o dos teatros y bancos, la monotonía de las mezquinas tiendas, con varios pisos desigualmente encaramados unos sobre otros, era ininterrumpida. Después llegó a Exeter Hall y examinó su prominente fachada con ojos provincianos, pues a pesar de sus viajes no conocía Londres muy bien. Exeter Hall, naturalmente, le hizo acordarse de su tío Boldero, aquel gran disidente ardoroso, y de su propia juventud devota. Era ridículo cavilar acerca de lo que diría y pensaría su tío si el anciano supiera que su sobrino se había fugado con una muchacha pretendiendo seducirla en París. ¡Era enormemente divertido!

Sin embargo, había terminado con todo aquello. Estaba totalmente fuera del asunto. Ella le había dicho que se marchara y se había marchado. Tenía dinero para llegar a casa; no tenía más que pedir lo que necesitara. Lo demás era asunto suyo. Él se iría solo a París y encontraría otras diversiones. Era absurdo haber imaginado que Sofía fuera apropiada para él. En una familia como los Baines no era razonable esperar descubrir una amante ideal. ¡No!; había sido un error. Todo aquel empeño era una equivocación. Ella casi lo había puesto en ridículo. Pero él no era hombre que se dejase poner en ridículo. Había conservado intacta su dignidad.

Eso se dijo. Sin embargo, su dignidad y también su orgullo no dejaban de sangrar, goteando sangre sin cesar por las aceras del Strand.

Estaba otra vez en Salisbury Street. Imaginó a Sofía en su habitación. ¡La muy estúpida! La deseaba. La deseaba con un ardor excesivo. Aborrecía la idea de verse burlado. Aborrecía la idea de que ella quedara inmaculada. Y continuó imaginándola en la excitante intimidad de aquella maldita habitación.

Luego bajó Salisbury Street. No deseaba hacer tal cosa, pero lo hizo.

—¡Oh, diablos! —murmuró— Está claro que tengo que pasar por ello.

Se sentía desesperado. Estaba dispuesto a pagar cualquier precio por poder decirse a sí mismo que había conseguido aquello en lo que había puesto su empeño.

—Mi esposa no ha salido, ¿verdad? —preguntó al portero.

—No estoy seguro, señor; creo que no —respondió aquél.

El temor de que Sofía ya se hubiese marchado lo llenaba de rabia. Cuando vio que su baúl estaba todavía allí recobró las esperanzas y corrió escaleras arriba.

La vio medio encima y medio fuera de la cama, un fragmento de humanidad arrugado y sinuoso que se

perfilaba contra la colcha blanca y azulada; su sombrero estaba en el suelo, con el moteado velo arrastrando. Aquel espectáculo le pareció lo más conmovedor que había visto en su vida, aunque la cara de la joven no se veía. Lo olvidó todo salvo la extraña y profunda emoción que se apoderó de él. Se acercó a la cama. Ella no se movió.

Al oír que entraba alguien y sabiendo que tenía que tratarse de Gerald, Sofía se había forzado a permanecer inmóvil. Una esperanza disparatada y espléndida surgió en ella. Obligada por toda la fuerza de su voluntad a no moverse, no pudo evitar un sollozo que se ocultaba emboscado en su garganta.

El ruido de aquel sollozo hizo que a Gerald se le saltasen las lágrimas.

—¡Sofía! —la llamó.

Pero no se movió. Otro sollozo la sacudió.

—Muy bien, pues —dijo Gerald—. Nos quedaremos en Londres hasta que podamos casarnos. Yo lo arreglaré. Buscaré para ti una casa de huéspedes agradable y diré que eres mi prima. Yo me quedaré en este hotel e iré a verte todos los días.

Silencio.

—¡Gracias! —balbuceó—¡Gracias!

Él vio que su pequeña mano enguantada se alargaba hacia él, como una antena; la cogió, se arrodilló y la enlazó torpemente por la cintura. Por alguna razón no se atrevió a besarla.

Un inmenso alivio los invadió poco a poco.

—Yo..., yo..., de verdad... —Ella empezó a decir algo, pero los sollozos no le dejaron continuar.

—¿Qué? ¿Qué dices, queridísima mía? —preguntó él ansiosamente.

Y ella hizo otro esfuerzo.

—De verdad que no podría haber ido a París contigo sin estar casada —consiguió decir por fin—. De verdad que no podía.

—¡No, no! —la tranquilizó él— Por supuesto que no podías. Era yo el que estaba equivocado. Pero no sabes cómo me sentí... Sofía, ahora está todo bien, ¿no?

Ella se sentó y le besó.

Fue tan maravilloso y conmovedor que él rompió a llorar sin rebozo. Sofía vio en la fácil intensidad de su emoción una garantía de la futura felicidad de ambos. E igual que él la había tranquilizado, ahora ella lo tranquilizó a él. Se apretaron el uno contra el otro, igualmente sorprendidos de la melancolía dulce, exquisita y dichosa que los impregnaba por completo. Era el remordimiento por haberse peleado, por haberles faltado la fe en el supremo acierto de la gran aventura. Todo estaba bien y así seguiría siendo; se habían portado de una forma criminalmente absurda. Era remordimiento, pero también pura dicha, ¡compensaba por la pelea! ¡Gerald recuperó sus perfecciones a los ojos de Sofía! ¡Era el espíritu de la bondad y el honor! Y, para él, ella volvía a ser la amante ideal, que sin embargo sería también una esposa. Y mientras su pensamiento recorría rápidamente los pasos necesarios para el matrimonio, no dejaba de decirse, muy lejos, en alguna remota cueva del cerebro: «¡La tendré! ¡La tendré!». No reflexionó en que aquel frágil esqueje del tronco Baines, que se nutría inconscientemente de la fuerza acumulada durante generaciones de vida honrada, le había infligido una derrota.

Después de tomar el té, Gerald, muy contento con el universo, fue fiel a su palabra y encontró una irreprochable casa de huéspedes para Sofía en Westminster, cerca de la abadía. Ella se quedó asombrada de las mentiras que él dijo a la dueña sobre ella y sobre sus circunstancias en general. Encontró también una iglesia y un párroco en las inmediaciones; en media hora se iniciaron las formalidades preliminares a la celebración de una boda. Explicó a Sofía que como ahora era residente en Londres sería más sencillo volver a empezar desde el principio. Ella, sagazmente, estuvo de acuerdo. ¡Como en modo alguno deseaba sentirse ofendida otra vez, no hizo indagaciones acerca de las demás formalidades que antes, debido a la burocracia, se habían visto tan inesperadamente frustradas! Sabía que iba a casarse y eso bastaba. Al día siguiente llevó a efecto su filial idea de telegrafiar a su madre.

Capitulo II

UNA CENA

I

Habían ido a Versalles y cenado allí. Un tranvía les había bastado para llegar, pero para el regreso, Gerald, que había bebido champán, no se conformó con menos de un coche. Además insistió en entrar en París por el Bois y el Arco de Triunfo. Para satisfacer totalmente su engreimiento habría sido necesario abrir de par en par las puertas de honor del Arco y permitir que su coche pasara por ellas; verse obligado a rodear el monumento en vez de pasar por debajo de él hería la sensación de poderío que el champán produce. Gerald estaba muy orgulloso aquel día. Había estado enseñando a Sofía las maravillas de la ciudad y no pudo evitar la sensación secreta del cicerone: que él mismo era en cierto modo el responsable de las maravillas. Además estaba muy satisfecho con el efecto que produjeron sobre la joven.

Sofía, al llegar a París con el anillo en su triunfante dedo, había mencionado con timidez la cuestión de los vestidos. Nadie hubiera sospechado por su tono que estuviera poseída por el deseo de la ropa francesa como por un demonio. La prontitud de la respuesta de Gerald la había sorprendido y encantado. También Gerald estaba poseído por un demonio. Estaba deseando verla ataviada a la francesa. Conocía algunas de las tiendas y talleres de la Rue de la Paix, la Chaussée d'Antin y el Palais Royal. Él entendía mucho más que ella de trapos, pues sus anteriores negocios en París lo habían puesto en relación con las grandes casas de moda; Sofía sufrió una momentánea humillación al descubrir que la opinión privada que él tenía de sus vestidos era que no eran tales vestidos en absoluto. Ella sabía perfectamente que no eran parisienses, ni siquiera de Londres, pero los consideraba muy buenos. Curó la herida, no obstante, pensando que Gerald se había guardado sus consejos para no herir su amor propio. Gerald la había llevado a un establecimiento de la Chaussée d'Antin. No era una de las que Gerald llamaba *les grandes maisons,* pero estaba muy próximo a ellas y cultivaba la verdadera *haute couture*; se acordaban perfectamente de Gerald.

Sofía había ido temblando y avergonzada, pero en su corazón valerosamente decidida a salir hecha una auténtica francesa. Pero aquellos modelos la asustaron. Superaban hasta lo más fantástico que hubiera visto por la calle. Retrocedió ante ellos y pareció buscar refugio en Gerald, como si estuviese suplicándole protección moral y contestándole a él en vez de a la vendedora cuando ésta hacía observaciones en un inglés acartonado. Los precios también la asustaron. La bagatela más sencilla costaba allí dieciséis libras; ¡y la histórica «seda» de su madre, tan elaborada que costaba doce libras, se tenía por cercana a lo inexpresable! Gerald le dijo que no tenía que pensar en los precios. A ella, sin embargo, algún instinto la obligaba a pensar en los precios; a ella, que en casa despreciaba la estrechez de la vida en la Plaza. En la Plaza se la consideraba totalmente desprovista de sentido común, imprudente sin remedio; sin embargo, allí, era como si en su interior fluyese sin cesar un manantial de sagacidad, un antídoto permanente contra la locura general en la que se veía. Con extraordinaria rapidez se había formado el hábito de predicar la moderación a Gerald. Detestaba ver «tirar el dinero»; su idea de la frontera entre tirar el dinero y gastarlo juiciosamente seguía siendo la idea de la Plaza.

Gerald se reía. Pero ella decía, picada y ruborizándose pero segura de sí misma:

—¡Ríete si quieres! —Todo era deleitosamente grato.

Aquella tarde se puso el primero de los trajes nuevos. Lo llevó todo el día. Había elegido algo que no fuera demasiado específico para la mañana ni para la tarde, para tiempo fresco ni caluroso. Era de tafetán azul pálido con rayas de un azul más oscuro, con el cuerpo con basquiña y la falda interior de tafetán parecido pero sin rayas. El efecto de la ornamentada sobrefalda cayendo sobre la falda lisa con su pequeño volante doble era una delicia, según pensaba ella y también Gerald. La cintura era más alta que ninguna de las que había tenido hasta entonces, y la crinolina muy amplia. Sujeta a la cabeza con un gran lazo y flotantes cintas azules llevaba una frágil capota plana, como un gorrito de bebé, que dejaba que el cabello se escapara por delante y su voluminoso moño saliera por detrás. Un gran velo moteado salía de la capota y caía sobre el moño. La doble falda se extendía en ondas sobre las rodillas de Gerald en el coche; ella iba recostada en los duros almohadones, con mirada arrogante y sin pensar más que en el intenso y palpitante gozo de vivir, anhelando con doloroso ardor más y más placeres, entonces y siempre.

Mientras el coche se deslizaba por la penumbra de los Campos Elíseos, anchos y desiertos, para adentrarse en el luminoso París que les aguardaba, otro coche tirado por dos caballos blancos les adelantó como un rayo y desapareció en una nube de polvo. Su único ocupante, con excepción del cochero y de un lacayo, era una mujer. Gerald se la quedó mirando.

—¡Cáspita! —exclamó—. ¡Es Hortense!

Tal vez fuera Hortense, tal vez no. Pero él se convenció instantáneamente de que era ella. ¡No todas las tardes se encontraba uno con Hortense guiando sola en los Campos Elíseos, y menos en agosto!

—¿Hortense? —preguntó Sofía.

—Sí; Hortense Schneider.

—¿Quién es?

—¿No has oído hablar de Hortense Schneider?

—¡No!

—¡Cómo! ¿No sabes quién es Offenbach?

—Pues... no sé. Creo que no.

Él puso cara de no poderlo creer.

—¿No querrás decir que nunca has oído hablar de *Barba Azul?*

—Claro que he oído hablar de Barba Azul —dijo ella—¿Quién no?

—Me refiero a la ópera, la de Offenbach.

Sofía meneó la cabeza; apenas sabía lo que era una ópera.

—¡Caramba! ¿Cómo es posible?

Daba a entender que era la primera vez que se topaba con semejante ignorancia. En realidad estaba encantado de ver cuán en blanco estaba la página en la que tenía que escribir. Y Sofía no se alarmó en absoluto. Saboreaba la instrucción que salía de los labios de Gerald. Para ella era un placer aprender de aquel pozo inagotable de conocimientos mundanos. Ante el mundo haría todo lo posible por asimilar la omnisciencia de todos los aspectos de aquél, pero ante él, tal como era el actual estado de ánimo de Sofía, gustaba de pasar por una chicuela ignorante y no iniciada.

—Pues la Schneider lleva haciendo furor desde el año antepasado —respondió él—, pero furor de verdad.

—¡Ojalá me hubiera fijado en ella! —exclamó Sofía.

—En cuanto se reabra el *Varietés* iremos a verla —añadió él, y luego le dio su versión detallada de la carrera de Hortense Schneider.

¡Más alegrías para ella en el futuro inmediato! Apenas había penetrado aún el caparazón de su dicha. Se regocijaba en aquel destino deslumbrador que comprendía libertad, fortuna, eterna alegría y al exquisito Gerald.

Al atravesar la Plaza de la Concordia, inquirió:

—¿Volvemos al hotel?

—No —dijo él—. He pensado que podíamos ir a cenar a alguna parte, si no es demasiado pronto.

—¿Después de todo lo que hemos comido?

—¿Qué es lo que hemos comido? ¡De todos modos, tú has comido cinco veces más que yo!

—¡Oh, yo estoy dispuesta! —contestó.

Lo estaba. Aquel día, por ser el primer día de su vestido francés, lo consideraba como el de su debut en la vertiginosa vida de las capitales. Vivía en un embeleso de felicidad, en un éxtasis que no podía sentir fatiga, ni de cuerpo ni de alma.

II

Era más de medianoche cuando entraron en el restaurante Sylvain; Gerald, tras haber decidido no ir al hotel, había cambiado de idea y fueron a él, y tras haber ido a él se quedó largo rato, ¡cómo no! Sofía se iba haciendo ya a la idea de que con Gerald era imposible prever con exactitud más de cinco minutos del futuro.

Cuando el *chasseur*[38] abrió la puerta para franquearles el paso y Sofía entró recatadamente en el resplandeciente interior amarillo del restaurante, seguida de Gerald en su papel de hombre de mundo, atrajeron la atención de los numerosos y rutilantes clientes de Sylvain. Ningún rostro podía haber contrastado de una manera más provocativa con los rostros de las mujeres que estaban en los reservados que el de Sofía, tan infantil entre el gorrito de bebé y el enorme lazo, tan cándida, tan adorablemente consciente de su pura belleza y del hecho de que ya no era una doncella sino igual en conocimiento a cualquier mujer del mundo. Vio a su alrededor, apiñados en torno a las blancas mesas, una multitud de labios de un rojo violento, mejillas empolvadas, ojos fríos y duros, caras arrogantes, que mostraban extrema compostura, y senos insolentes. Lo que más le había impresionado de París, más aún que los ómnibus de tres caballos, era la extraordinaria seguridad en sí mismas de todas las mujeres, sus actitudes en absoluto avergonzadas, su tranquila aceptación de la mirada pública. Parecían decir: «Somos las célebres parisienses». La asustaban: le parecían extremadamente corruptas y orgullosas de su corrupción. Había visto ya una docena de mujeres aplicarse polvos en la cara a la vista de todo el mundo sin apurarse más que si se estuvieran atusando ligeramente el cabello. No podía entender semejante atrevimiento. En cuanto a ellas, se maravillaban de los fenómenos que veían en la persona de Sofía; la admiraban, admitían el estilo de su traje, pero no envidiaban su inocencia ni su hermosura; envidiaban solamente su juventud y el fresco tono de sus mejillas.

—*Encoré des Anglais!*[39] —dijeron algunos, como si eso lo explicara todo.

Gerald tenía una manera muy brusca de dirigirse a los camareros; cuanto más obsequiosos eran ellos más altivo se tornaba; para él un camarero jefe no era superior a un pinche. Dio órdenes en voz alta, en un francés del que tanto él como Sofía estaban orgullosos; se dispuso una mesa para ellos en un rincón, cerca de una de las grandes ventanas. Sofía se sentó en el banco tapizado de terciopelo verde y plegó el abanico de marfil que le había regalado Gerald. Hacía mucho calor; todas las ventanas estaban abiertas de par en par y el ruido de la calle se mezclaba con el tintineo del comedor. Fuera, contra un cielo de un púrpura muy oscuro, Sofía pudo distinguir la negra estructura de un gigantesco edificio; era el nuevo teatro de la ópera.

—¡Hay gente de todo tipo aquí! —dijo Gerald satisfecho tras encargar sopa helada y Mosela espumoso. Sofía no sabía qué era el Mosela, pero imaginó que cualquier cosa sería mejor que el champán.

Sylvain era un local típico del Segundo Imperio y especialmente famoso por su comedor. Caro y alegre, proporcionaba con su discreta decoración un suntuoso escenario donde loretas[40], actrices, mujeres respetables y de vez en cuando alguna griseta[41] afortunada podían satisfacer la curiosidad que sentían unas por otras. En su liberalidad era extremadamente correcto como local de ocio; no había muchos restaurantes céntricos que pudieran competir con éxito con las atracciones rivales del Bois y con las umbrías arboledas de los Campos Elíseos una noche de agosto. La complicada riqueza de los vestidos, los metros y metros de costura fina, los infinitos plisados, las insinuaciones, más o menos imprudentes, de los tesoros de lencería bordada, y, lo que saltaba a la vista más que todo esto, los vivos colores de sedas y muselinas, velos, plumas y flores, apilados en montones, por así decirlo, sin orden ni concierto sobre los universales almohadones verdes hasta el último rincón del restaurante y multiplicados en los espejos dorados, aquel espectáculo embriagaba a Sofía. Sus ojos centelleaban. Se tomó la sopa con ansia y probó el vino, aunque ningún deseo por su parte de que le gustara el vino podía hacer que le gustara; después, al ver piñas en una gran mesa cubierta de frutas, dijo a Gerald que le gustaría comer piña; Gerald encargó una.

Hizo acopio de autoestima e ingenio y empezó a dar a Gerald su opinión sobre los vestidos. Podía hacerlo con impunidad, pues el suyo estaba sin duda fuera de toda crítica. Algunos los condenó sin remisión y no hubo uno que mereciera su aprobación sin reservas. Toda la ridícula cominería de su provincianismo de colegiala se puso de manifiesto en aquel ansioso y afectado torrente de palabras. Fue sin embargo lo bastante

inteligente como para deducir al cabo de un rato, por el tono y la expresión de Gerald, que se estaba poniendo en ridículo y le estaba aburriendo. Y pasó hábilmente de hablar del gusto a hacerlo sobre el trabajo —hizo mucho hincapié en la palabra— y declaró que era milagroso más allá de lo que se podía describir. Creía saber lo que eran la modistería y la sombrerería y su pequeño caudal de conocimiento especializado le hizo imaginar una ciudad entera de muchachas cosiendo, cosiendo y cosiendo día y noche. En los pocos días que llevaba en París, entre visitas a Chantilly y otros lugares, se había asombrado de la acumulación de lujo de las tiendas; se había asombrado, tomando como modelo la Plaza de San Lucas, de cómo podían prosperar todas. Pero ahora, en su primera vislumbre real de la trivial y licenciosa profusión de uno entre cien restaurantes, se asombraba de que hubiese tan pocas tiendas. Pensaba en lo espléndido que era para el comercio todo aquel derroche. Las ideas que se perseguían unas a otras en aquella linda y tonta cabeza formaban un sorprendente batiburrillo.

—Y bien, ¿qué te parece Sylvain? —preguntó Gerald, impaciente por confirmar que su Sylvain la había dejado anonadada.

—¡Oh, Gerald! —murmuró ella, como diciendo que no se podía expresar con palabras. Y le tocó furtivamente la mano con la suya.

El aburrimiento motivado por las disquisiciones críticas sobre los defectos de la vestimenta parisiense se disipó del rostro de Gerald.

—¿De qué piensas que están hablando aquéllos? —dijo él haciendo un gesto con la cabeza en dirección a un grupo de tres loretas llamativamente vestidas y dos hombres de mediana edad que charlaban con animación, dos mesas más allá.

—¿De qué están hablando?

—De la ejecución del asesino Rivain, que tiene lugar en Auxerre pasado mañana. Están organizando ir todos juntos a verla.

—¡Oh, qué idea más horrible! —exclamó Sofía.

—¡La guillotina, ya sabes! —añadió Gerald.

—¿Pero puede verlo la gente?

—Sí, claro.

—Pues a mí me parece horrible.

—Sí; por eso van a verlo. Además, ese hombre no es un criminal corriente. Es muy joven y bien parecido, y está bien relacionado. Y ha matado a la célebre Claudine...».

—¿Claudine?

—Claudine Jacquinot. Desde luego es imposible que la conozcas. Fue una tremenda..., ejem..., aquí, en los cuarenta. Hizo un montón de dinero y se retiró a su ciudad natal.

Sofía, a pesar de sus esfuerzos por mantenerse en el papel de una mujer que no tiene nada que aprender, se sonrojó.

—Entonces era mayor que él.

—Le llevaba treinta y cinco años.

—¿Por qué la mató?

—No quería darle bastante dinero. Era su amante. O mejor dicho, una de ellas. Él necesitaba el dinero para una amiga joven, ya ves. La mató y le quitó todas las joyas que llevaba. Siempre que iba a verla, ella llevaba todas sus mejores joyas, y puedes apostar a que una mujer como ella tenía unas cuantas. Al parecer, hacía tiempo que tenía miedo de que quisiera acabar con ella.

—Entonces ¿por qué se veía con él? ¿Y por qué llevaba sus joyas?

—¡Porque le gustaba pasar miedo, boba! Algunas mujeres sólo se divierten cuando están aterrorizadas. Raro, ¿verdad?

La mirada de Gerald insistía en encontrarse con la de su mujer al concluir aquellas revelaciones. Actuaba como si aquellas historias fueran lo más normal del mundo y escandalizarse por ellas fuera infantil. Sofía, arrojada de improviso a una civilización extraña que mostraba con toda franqueza su sensualidad, con la guía de un joven para quien su inteligencia a medio formar era un juguete muy divertido, se sintió misteriosamente incómoda, perturbada por los siniestros y huidizos fantasmas de unas ideas que sólo entendía vagamente. Bajó los ojos. Gerald se rió afectadamente. Ella ya no comió más piña.

Inmediatamente después se presentó en el restaurante una aparición que durante un momento interrumpió todas las conversaciones. Era una mujer alta y madura que llevaba, sobre un vestido de seda negra y purpúrea, una salida de baile amplia y suelta de terciopelo bermellón, con borlas doradas. Ningún otro traje podría tolerar la vecindad de aquella prenda, árabe por su forma, rusa por su color y parisiense por su estilo. Resplandecía. El voluminoso peinado de la mujer iba sujeto con cintas de trencilla dorada y rosetas de color carmesí. La seguía un joven inglés de etiqueta y con patillas que hacía gala de la corrección más exacta. La mujer se dirigió, un poco jadeante, a una mesa cercana a la de Gerald y Sofía y tomó posesión de ella con un aire de costumbre, casi de tedio. Se sentó, se quitó la capa descubriendo su seno majestuoso y respiró hondo. Sin hacer, según parecía, ningún caso del inglés, que ocupó con altanería el asiento frente al suyo, sus grandes ojos despectivos recorrieron el restaurante, enfrentándose pausada e imperiosamente con la curiosidad que había despertado. Su belleza había sido sin duda deslumbradora, todavía era refulgente, pero la flor estaba a punto de agostarse. Estaba admirablemente pintada *y* empolvada; tenía *unos brazos espléndidos y largas pestañas.* Tenía poco que criticar, salvo la excesiva madurez de una rubia que lucha en vano contra la obesidad. Y su atavío combinaba la audacia con la moda. Depositó negligentemente sus costosas chucherías sobre la mesa y luego, tras haber intimidado a todos los circunstantes, tomó el *menú que* le ofrecía el camarero jefe y se puso a estudiarlo.

—¡Es una de ésas! —susurró Gerald a Sofía.

—¿Una de cuáles? —susurró Sofía a su vez.

Gerald levantó las cejas como advirtiéndole y le hizo un guiño. El inglés les había oído y por su orgulloso rostro pasó una ráfaga de frío desagrado. Era evidente que pertenecía a una categoría mucho más elevada que la de Gerald; éste, aunque siempre podía consolarse pensando que había ido a la universidad con los mejores, percibía su propia inferioridad y no podía ocultar que la percibía. Gerald era rico; provenía de una familia rica; pero no poseía el hábito de la riqueza. Cuando gastaba dinero profusamente lo hacía como una bravuconada, demasiado consciente de su grandeza y demasiado consciente de las dificultades de su adquisición, dificultades que él había dejado atrás. El inglés de las patillas nunca había ganado dinero, nunca había sabido el valor que tiene, nunca se había imaginado a sí mismo sin disponer de tanto dinero cuanto le pudiera apetecer. Tenía el aspecto de alguien acostumbrado a dar órdenes y a mirar por encima del hombro a sus inferiores. Tenía una absoluta seguridad en sí mismo. El que su acompañante hiciera poco caso de él no parecía incomodarlo en lo más mínimo. Ella se dirigió a él en francés. Él le contestó en inglés, lacónicamente; después, en inglés, encargó la cena. En cuanto sirvieron el champán empezó a beber; entre copa y copa se acariciaba suavemente las patillas. La mujer no volvió a pronunciar palabra.

Gerald hablaba en voz más alta. Con aquel aristocrático inglés observándolo no había manera de que estuviera tranquilo. Y no se limitó a hablar más alto; sacó a colación referencias al dinero, los viajes y las experiencias mundanas. Aunque trataba de impresionar al inglés, no hacía más que ponerse en ridículo ante él; de lo cual era vagamente consciente. Sofía reparó en ello y lo lamentó. Con todo, al sentirse insignificante, aceptó la superioridad del inglés de las patillas como una cosa natural. El comportamiento de Gerald lo rebajaba un tanto en su estimación. Lo miró, contemplando su pulcritud y su buena figura, su rostro vivaz, su excelente ropa, y decidió que era muy preferible a cualquier aristócrata de mandíbula pesada y nariz larga.

La mujer cuya capa bermellón se extendía en torno suyo como una fortificación dirigió la palabra a su acompañante. Él no comprendió. Trató de expresarse en francés y no lo consiguió. Entonces la mujer volvió a empezar y habló largo rato. Cuando terminó, él meneó la cabeza; su conocimiento del francés se limitaba al vocabulario de la comida.

—¡Guillotina! —murmuró, pues era la única palabra que había entendido del discurso de la mujer.

—*Oui, oui! Guillotine. Enfin...!* —exclamó ella con excitación. Animada por su éxito al hacerle entender al menos una palabra de sus observaciones, comenzó por tercera vez.

—Discúlpeme. La señora está hablando de la ejecución que tendrá lugar pasado mañana en Auxerre. *N'est-ce pas, madame, que* vous *parliez de Rivain?*[42].

El inglés echó una mirada de ira a Gerald por su oficiosa interrupción. Pero la mujer le sonrió

benévolamente e insistió en hablar con su amigo a través de él. Y el inglés tuvo que resignarse a la situación.

—No hay esta noche en París un restaurante en el que no se hable de la ejecución —dijo Gerald por su cuenta.

—¡Desde luego! —observó el inglés.

El vino les afectaba de maneras diferentes.

En aquel momento hizo su aparición en la entrada un joven francés de aspecto frágil, pequeña estatura y cara pálida que acababa en una perilla negra. Miró en tomo suyo y, al reconocer a la mujer de la capa escarlata, la saludó de forma muy discreta. Después vio a Gerald y sus rasgos fatigados y ajados mostraron una repentina y sobresaltada sonrisa. Se acercó rápidamente con el sombrero en la mano, tomó la mano de Gerald y la estrechó efusivamente.

—Mi esposa —dijo Gerald, con la solemne atención de un hombre resuelto a probar que está sobrio.

El joven se tornó serio y excesivamente ceremonioso. Se inclinó sobre la mano de Sofía y la besó. El impulso de aquélla fue echarse a reír, pero la seriedad del joven la contuvo. Dirigió una rápida mirada a Gerald, ruborizándose y como diciendo «esta comedia no es culpa mía». Gerald dijo algo, el joven se volvió hacia él y su rostro recuperó su sonrisa acogedora.

—*Monsieur* Chirac —terminó por fin Gerald las presentaciones—, un amigo mío de cuando vivía en París.

Estaba orgulloso de haberse encontrado por casualidad con un conocido en un restaurante. Aquello demostraba que era un parisiense y mejoraba su posición con el inglés de las patillas y con la capa bermellón.

—¿Es la primera vez que viene a París, *madame?* —preguntó *monsieur* Chirac a Sofía en un inglés medroso y renqueante.

—Sí —respondió ella con una risita. El joven se inclinó de nuevo.

Chirac felicitó calurosamente a Gerald por su matrimonio.

—¡No lo mencione! —dijo en inglés el humorístico Gerald, riéndose de su propia agudeza—. ¿Qué hay de esa ejecución?

—¡Ah! —replicó Chirac, tomando aliento y mirando a Sofía—, ¡Rivain! ¡Rivain! —E hizo un amplio y significativo gesto con la mano.

Se vio al momento que Gerald había tocado el tema que asolaba en secreto el mundo de las cenas como un incendio subterráneo asola una mina.

—¡Yo voy! —dijo Chirac orgulloso, echando una mirada a Sofía, que sonrió tímidamente.

Chirac inició una conversación en francés con Gerald. Sofía comprendió que a Gerald le sorprendía e impresionaba lo que le decía Chirac y que a éste a su vez estaba sorprendido. Después Gerald buscó trabajosamente su agenda y tras andar un poco en ella se la tendió a Chirac para que éste escribiese en ella.

—M*adame!* —murmuró Chirac, recobrando su ceremoniosa tiesura para despedirse— *Alors, c'est entendu, mon cher ami!*[43] —dijo a Gerald, que inclinó la cabeza flemáticamente. Y Chirac se fue a la mesa en la que estaban las tres loretas y los dos hombres de mediana edad. Fue recibido con entusiasmo.

Sofía empezó a sentirse atormentada por un leve temor de que Gerald no era el de siempre. No pensó que estuviese achispado. La idea de que estuviera achispado la habría escandalizado. No podía pensar con claridad. Se encontraba perdida y aturdida en el laberinto de nuevas y vivas impresiones al que la había conducido Gerald. Pero su prudencia estaba despierta.

—Creo que estoy cansada —dijo en voz baja.

—No querrás irte, ¿verdad? —inquirió él, molesto.

—Bueno...

—¡Oh, espera un poco!

La propietaria de la capa bermellón se dirigió de nuevo a Gerald, quien se mostró halagado. Mientras hablaba con ella pidió un brandy con soda. Y después no pudo resistir la tentación de exhibir ante ella su familiaridad con la vida parisiense y le contó cómo se había encontrado con Hortense Schneider detrás de un par de caballos blancos. La capa bermellón se torno más sociable aún a la mención de aquel sonoro nombre y charló con grata vivacidad. Su amigo los contemplaba con hostilidad.

—¿Oyes eso? —explicó Gerald a Sofía, que estaba allí sentada en silencio—. Es sobre Hortense Schneider, ¿te acuerdas?, la hemos visto esta noche. Al parecer apostó un luis con no sé quién y cuando perdió envió el luis engastado en diamantes por valor de cien mil francos. Así es como las gastan aquí.

—¡Oh! —exclamó Sofía, más perdida que nunca en el laberinto.

—Discúlpeme —intervino el inglés. Había oído las palabras «Hortense Schneider» repetidas en la conversación y al final se le ocurrió que estaban hablando de Hortense Schneider— Discúlpeme —volvió a empezar—, ¿Dice usted..., se refiere a Hortense Schneider?

—Sí —repuso Gerald—, La hemos visto esta noche.

—Está en Trouville —dijo rotundamente el inglés.

Gerald movió la cabeza con convencimiento.

—Anoche la invité a cenar en Trouville —insistió el inglés—, Y esta noche actúa en el Teatro del Casino.

Gerald se vio rechazado pero no vencido.

—¿Qué obra interpreta esta noche? ¡Dígamelo! —se mofó.

—No sé por qué iba a tener que decírselo.

—¡Hum! —replicó Gerald—. Si es cierto lo que dice, es muy extraño que yo la haya visto en los Campos Elíseos esta noche, ¿no?

El inglés bebió otra copa de vino.

—¡Si es que quiere insultarme, señor...! —empezó con frialdad.

—¡Gerald! —le conminó Sofía en un susurro.

—¡Cállate! —le espetó él.

Un violinista disfrazado irrumpió en aquel momento en el restaurante y empezó a tocar con furia. La conmoción producida por aquella extraña aparición acalló momentáneamente la disputa, pero pronto volvió a saltar, resguardada por la música: una vulgar y tediosa disputa de borrachines. Se recrudecía cada vez más. El violinista la contemplaba con recelo por encima de su violín. Chirac la observaba con cautela. En vez de prestar atención a la música, los circunstantes la contemplaban con interés imparcial y deportivo. Las voces inglesas se hacían cada vez más amenazantes.

Entonces, de repente, el inglés de las patillas, indicando la puerta con la cabeza, dijo en voz más baja:

—¿No sería mejor arreglar esto fuera?

—¡Estoy a su disposición! —dijo Gerald, poniéndose en pie.

La propietaria de la capa bermellón miró a Chirac levantando las cejas con un gesto de cansada repugnancia, pero no dijo nada. Tampoco Sofía dijo nada. El terror la dominaba.

El cortejante de la capa, con el abrigo arrastrando por el suelo tras de sí, salió del restaurante sin ofrecer disculpa ni explicación alguna a su dama.

—Espérame aquí —dijo Gerald a Sofía, desafiante—. Vuelvo en un minuto.

—¡Pero, Gerald! —Le puso la mano en la manga.

Él retiró el brazo.

—¡Que me esperes aquí, te digo! —repitió.

El portero abrió la puerta obsequiosamente a los dos inseguros juerguistas, de quienes se apartó el violinista, que seguía tocando.

Sofía, pues, se quedó al lado de la capa bermellón. Se sentía totalmente desamparada. Todo su orgullo de mujer casada la había abandonado. Una profunda vergüenza la paralizaba; tenía los ojos clavados en una columna para evitar el ataque universal de las miradas. Se sentía como si fuera una niña indiscreta, y eso era lo que aparentaba. Ni la radiante belleza de sus rasgos, ni la gracia y el estilo de su traje parisiense, ni el certificado de un anillo, ni su prematura iniciación en los misterios podían salvarla de tener el aspecto de una estúpida inexperta cuya estupidez había sido su perdición. Invadió su rostro el rubor más violento, que permaneció en él, y toda la fundamental inocencia de su carácter, que había quedado escondida bajo las extremas experiencias de su breve convivencia con Gerald, ascendió de nuevo a la superficie con aquel rubor. Su situación despertó piedad en unos pocos corazones y un despreocupado desdén en los demás. Pero, dado que una vez más se trataba de *ces Anglais,* nadie pudo sorprenderse.

Sin mover la cabeza volvió los ojos hacia su reloj; las dos y media. El violinista dejó de tocar y pasó su gorra con borlas. La capa bermellón echó una moneda. Sofía lo contempló inmóvil, hasta que el violinista, cansado de esperar, pasó a la siguiente mesa y alivió la agonía de la joven. No llevaba dinero. Quería mirar el reloj, pero sus dedos no se movían.

Con una exclamación, la señora de la capa se levantó y miró por la ventana, charló con los camareros y luego se trasladó con su capa a la mesa vecina, donde fue recibida con afable simpatía por las tres loretas, Chirac y los otros dos hombres. El grupo examinaba con disimulo a Sofía de vez en cuando. Después, Chirac salió con el camarero jefe, volvió, consultó con sus amigos y finalmente se acercó a Sofía. Eran las tres y veinte.

Repitió su magnífica inclinación.

—*Madame* —dijo—, ¿me permite que la lleve a su hotel?

No hizo referencia a Gerald, en parte sin duda porque su inglés podía resultar traicionero en un terreno difícil.

Sofía no tuvo suficiente presencia de ánimo para dar las gracias a su salvador.

—Pero ¿y la cuenta? —tartamudeó—. No está pagada.

Él no la comprendió inmediatamente. Pero uno de los camareros había captado una palabra familiar y acudió velozmente con una tira de papel en un plato.

—No llevo dinero —dijo Sofía con una débil sonrisa.

—*Je vous arrangerai ça*[44] —dijo él—, ¿Cómo se llama el hotel? Meurice, ¿no?

—Hotel Meurice —contestó Sofía—, sí.

El joven habló de la cuenta con el camarero jefe, que se la volvió a llevar como si fuese algo indecoroso; y de su brazo, que le ofreció puntillosamente y ella no pudo rechazar, Sofía abandonó el escenario de su ignominia. Estaba tan angustiada que no pudo hacerse con su crinolina en la puerta. ¡Fuera no había ni rastro de Gerald ni de su enemigo!

Subió a un carruaje abierto; en cinco minutos habían recorrido al trote el brillante silencio de la Rue de la Paix, atravesado la Place Vendôme y entrado en la Rue de Rivoli y el portero de noche del hotel se hallaba junto a la portezuela.

—He dicho en el restaurante adonde venía —dijo Chirac, con la cabeza descubierta bajo la larga columnata de la calle—. Si su esposo está allí, se lo diré. ¡Hasta mañana...!

Sus modales eran más maravillosos que cualquier cosa que Sofía hubiera podido imaginar. Eran como si estuviera en las Tullerías, sumidas en las tinieblas al otro lado de la calle, saludando a una emperatriz, en vez de estarse despidiendo de una chiquilla inexperta que todavía estaba demasiado apurada hasta para darle las gracias.

Huyó vela en mano por la ancha escalera de múltiples rincones; quizá Gerald estuviese ya en la habitación... ¡borracho! Era una posibilidad. Pero la habitación adornada con muñecos dorados estaba vacía.

Se sentó junto a la mesa cubierta de terciopelo en medio de las sombras que arrojaba la vela, cuya llama se mecía en la corriente de la ventana abierta. Sofía apretó los dientes y un frío furor se apoderó de ella en la noche calurosa y lánguida. Gerald era un imbécil. Ya era bastante malo el que hubiera llegado a achisparse, pero el haberla expuesto a la horrible situación de la que Chirac la había sacado, era indescriptiblemente vergonzoso. Era un imbécil. No tenía sentido común. Con todo su cautivador encanto, no se podía confiar en que no se pusiera y la pusiera a ella en ridículo, en un ridículo trágico. ¡Comparadlo con el señor Chirac! Se apoyó con desesperación en la mesa. No quería desvestirse. No quería moverse. Tenía que darse cuenta de su situación, tenía que verla.

¡Qué estupidez! ¡Qué estupidez! ¡Quién iba a decirlo, un viajante de comercio tirando un papel comprometedor a la hija de su cliente en la propia tienda: aquella fue la increíble estupidez con la que empezaron sus relaciones! ¡Y su disparatado gesto en el pozo! ¡Y su plan para traerla a París sin casarse! ¡Y luego aquella noche! ¡Qué monstruosa estupidez! Sola en la habitación era una mujer sabia y desilusionada, más sabia que ninguna de aquellas muñecas del restaurante.

¿Y no había llegado ella hasta Gerald, por decirlo así, pasando por encima del cadáver de su padre, valiéndose de mentiras, mentiras y más mentiras? Así se lo expresaba a sí misma... Por encima del cadáver de su padre. ¿Cómo iba a salir bien semejante aventura? ¿Cómo podía haber esperado alguna vez que saliera bien? En aquel momento veía sus actos con la terrible visión de un profeta hebreo.

Pensó en la Plaza y en su vida allí, con su madre y Constanza. Su orgullo jamás le permitiría volver a aquella vida, ni aunque le sucediera lo peor que le pudiera suceder. Era una de esas personas que están dispuestas a pagar sin protestar lo que han recibido.

Se oyó un ruido en el exterior. Se dio cuenta de que había empezado a amanecer. Se abrió la puerta y apareció Gerald.

Cambiaron una mirada indagadora y Gerald cerró la puerta. Gerald infectó el aire, pero ella vio enseguida que ya estaba sobrio. Le sangraba el labio.

—El señor Chirac me trajo a casa —dijo.

—Así parece —repuso Gerald secamente— Te dije que me esperaras. ¿No te dije que volvería?

Adoptaba el tono autoritario y ofendido de un hombre que está tratando ridículamente de ocultarse a sí mismo y a los demás el hecho de que se ha portado como un idiota.

A Sofía le molestó aquella injusticia.

—No creo que haga falta que me hables así —dijo.

—¿Cómo? —replicó él en tono intimidatorio, decidiendo que ella tenía que estar equivocada.

¡Y con qué dura expresión en su hermoso rostro!

La prudencia aconsejó a Sofía que aceptase la injusticia. Ella era suya. Arrebatada a su propio mundo, dependía enteramente del buen natural de Gerald.

—Me he dado un golpe en la barbilla con esa maldita balaustrada, al subir —dijo Gerald lúgubremente.

Ella sabía que era mentira.

—¿Sí? —replicó amablemente—. Deja que te lo lave.

Capítulo III

UNA AMBICIÓN SATISFECHA

I

Se fue a dormir sintiéndose muy desgraciada. Toda la gloria de su nueva vida se había eclipsado. Pero cuando se despertó, pocas horas después, en la majestuosidad aterciopelada de la gran habitación por la que Gerald estaba pagando un precio tan fantástico al día, se encontraba de mejor humor y muy dispuesta a reconsiderar sus veredictos. Su orgullo la inducía a dar la razón a Gerald y a creerse equivocada ella misma, pues era demasiado orgullosa para admitir que se había casado con un estúpido encantador e irresponsable. Y ¿no era cierto que tenía que pensar que estaba equivocada? Gerald le había dicho que esperara y no había esperado. Había dicho que volvería al restaurante y había vuelto. ¿Por qué no había esperado? No había esperado porque se había comportado como una tonta. Se había aterrorizado por nada. ¿No llevaba ya un mes frecuentando restaurantes? ¿O es que una mujer casada no es capaz de esperar a su marido en un restaurante sin parecer una boba? Y en cuanto a Gerald, ¿acaso podía haber actuado de otro modo? El otro inglés era evidentemente un bruto y estaba buscando pelea. Su manera de contradecir lo que decía Gerald fue muy ofensiva. Al invitarle el bruto a salir fuera, ¿qué podía hacer Gerald sino acceder? No haber accedido podría haber significado una pelea en el restaurante, ya que aquel bruto estaba borracho sin duda alguna. Comparado con aquel individuo, Gerald no estaba borracho en absoluto, sólo un poco alegre y charlatán. La mentirijilla de Gerald sobre la herida era natural; quería simplemente quitar importancia a todo aquel alboroto y no preocuparla. Era en realidad muy propio de Gerald el guardar silencio sobre lo que había ocurrido entre el bruto y él. Sin embargo estaba convencida de que Gerald, tan ágil y rápido, había dado al bruto con sus modos altaneros tanto como había recibido, si no más.

Y si ella fuera un hombre y hubiera pedido a su esposa que le esperara en un restaurante y la esposa se hubiera ido a casa acompañada por otro hombre, no hay duda de que se habría enfadado mucho más que Gerald. Se alegraba mucho de haberse dominado y de haber hecho gala de una mansa diplomacia. De este modo se había evitado una pelea; después de curarle la barbilla no había quedado en su actitud más que una leve frialdad.

Se levantó en silencio y empezó a vestirse, muy decidida a *tratar a Gerald como una* buena esposa debe tratar a su marido. Gerald no se movió; tenía el sueño profundo: era el suyo uno de esos organismos que nunca quieren irse a la cama y nunca quieren levantarse. Cuando había terminado de arreglarse y sólo le faltaba ponerse el cuerpo del vestido llamaron a la puerta. Dio un respingo.

—¡Gerald! —Se acercó a la cama, inclinó su seno desnudo sobre su marido y le rodeó el cuello con los brazos. Aquel método de volver al estado consciente no desagradaba a Gerald.

Volvieron a llamar. Él dejó escapar un gruñido.

—Están llamando a la puerta —susurró Sofía.

—Entonces ¿por qué no abres? —preguntó somnoliento.

—No estoy vestida, cariño.

Él la miró.

—¡Échate algo encima de los hombros, mujer! —dijo—, ¿Qué más da?

¡Allí estaba, portándose como una boba otra vez, a pesar de su resolución!

Obedeció y abrió la puerta con cautela, quedándose detrás de ella.

Una sirvienta de mediana edad, con un largo delantal blanco, habló en francés de cosas que escaparon a la comprensión de Sofía. Pero Gerald lo había oído desde la cama y contestó.

—*Bien, monsieur!* —La sirvienta hizo una inclinación y se marchó por el oscuro corredor.

—Es Chirac —explicó Gerald cuando ella cerró la puerta—. Se me había olvidado que le invité a almorzar con nosotros temprano. Está esperando en el salón. Ponte el corpiño y baja a charlar con él hasta que vaya yo.

Saltó de la cama y después, en camisa de noche, se desperezó y bostezó terroríficamente.

—¿Yo? —preguntó Sofía.

—¿Quién si no? —dijo Gerald con aquella curiosa sequedad satírica que a veces impregnaba su tono.

—¡Pero yo no hablo francés! —protestó ella.

—Yo no he dicho tal cosa —dijo Gerald con mayor sequedad— pero sabes igual que yo que él habla inglés.

—¡Oh, muy bien, pues! —murmuró ella con dócil celeridad.

Era evidente que Gerald no se había recobrado del todo de su legítimo desagrado por los sucesos de aquella noche. Examinó minuciosamente su boca en el espejo del armario Luis Felipe. Apenas mostraba huellas de la batalla.

—¡Oye! —la detuvo cuando, nerviosa por lo que le esperaba, estaba a punto de salir de la habitación —. Se me había ocurrido que podíamos ir hoy a Auxerre.

—¿A Auxerre? —repitió ella, preguntándose en qué circunstancias había oído aquel nombre. Entonces se acordó: era donde iban a ejecutar al asesino Rivain.

—Sí —dijo Gerald—, Chirac tiene que ir. Ahora está en un periódico. Cuando lo conocí era arquitecto. Tiene que ir y piensa que tiene mucha suerte. Así que pensé ir con él.

La verdad era que ya había acordado ir.

—Pero no a ver la ejecución, ¿verdad? —balbuceó ella.

—¿Por qué no? Siempre he deseado ver una ejecución, sobre todo en la guillotina. Y las ejecuciones son públicas en Francia. No tiene nada de malo ir a verlas.

—Pero ¿por qué quieres ver una ejecución?

—Sólo porque me apetece. Es un capricho que tengo, eso es todo. No veo que haya que tener una razón —dijo, echando agua en el diminuto aguamanil.

Ella estaba horrorizada.

—¿Y vas a dejarme aquí sola?

—Bueno —dijo él—; no veo por qué el haberme casado tiene que impedirme hacer algo que siempre he querido hacer. ¿Tú sí?

—¡Oh, no! —concedió ansiosamente.

—De acuerdo —concluyó él—. Puedes hacer lo que quieras. O quedarte aquí o venir conmigo. Si vienes a Auxerre, no hay ninguna necesidad de que veas la ejecución. Es una ciudad antigua, muy interesante; tiene catedral y demás. Pero, naturalmente, si no puedes soportar el estar en la misma ciudad que una guillotina, iré solo. Volveré mañana.

Estaba claro lo que quería. Ella reprimió las palabras que le venían a los labios e hizo cuanto pudo para rechazar los pensamientos que acudían a su mente.

—Desde luego que iré —dijo en voz baja. Vaciló y luego se acercó al lavabo y le besó en la parte de la mejilla que no estaba llena de jabón. Aquel beso, que la consoló y en cierto modo la tranquilizó, fue la expresión de una rendición cuya monstruosidad ni quiso admitir.

En el rico y polvoriento salón del hotel la esperaban Chirac y sus exquisitas formalidades. No había allí nadie más.

—Mi marido... —empezó, sonriendo y ruborizándose. Le agradaba Chirac.

Era la primera vez que tenía ocasión de utilizar aquella palabra con alguien que no fuera un criado. Le producía una sensación de seguridad. A los pocos momentos se dio cuenta de que Chirac la admiraba sinceramente, más aún, que le inspiraba algo que se asemejaba a la veneración. Hablando con gran lentitud y claridad le dijo que tendría que ir con su marido a Auxerre, ya que él no veía ninguna objeción, como queriendo decir que, si él no veía ninguna objeción, ella estaba conforme. Chirac se mostró de acuerdo en todo. A los cinco minutos parecía que era la cosa más natural y adecuada del mundo que, en su luna de miel, fuese con su marido a una determinada ciudad porque un conocido asesino iba a ser decapitado públicamente en ella.

—Mi esposo siempre ha deseado ver una ejecución —dijo después—. Sería una lástima que...

—Una experiencia psicológica —replicó Chirac, pronunciando la *p* del adjetivo—; será muy *intéressant.*. observarse a uno mismo en esas circunstancias...—. Sonrió con entusiasmo.

Ella pensó en lo extraños que eran los franceses, aun siendo tan amables. ¡Eso de ir a una ejecución con objeto de observarse a uno mismo!

II

Lo que no dejaba de impresionar a Sofía de la conducta no sólo de Gerald sino también de Chirac y de otras personas con las que tuvo contacto era su informalidad. De toda su vida estaba acostumbrada a ver que cualquier empresa, aun siendo de poca importancia, se sopesaba y luego se planificaba cuidadosamente de antemano. En la Plaza de San Lucas había siempre en todos los cerebros una especie de programa de la existencia preparado con una semana al menos de anticipación. Pero en el mundo de Gerald no se preveía nada. Asuntos complejos se decidían en un momento y se acometían con extraordinaria ligereza. ¡Como la excursión a Auxerre! Durante el almuerzo apenas se habló de ello; la conversación, en inglés por Sofía, versó, como es habitual en tales circunstancias, en las dificultades de los idiomas y en las diferencias entre los países. Nadie habría sospechado que ninguno de ellos sintiera preocupación alguna en cuanto el resto del día. La comida fue muy grata para Sofía; no sólo halló a Chirac amable y sincero, lo cual era un consuelo para ella, sino que Gerald volvió a hacer alarde de todo su encanto y buen humor. Después, de pronto, mientras tomaban el café, surgió la cuestión de los trenes como una crisis repentina. A los cinco minutos Chirac se había marchado —Sofía no entendió bien si a su oficina o a su casa —y al cuarto de hora ella y Gerald se dirigían con premura a la Gare de Lyon; Gerald llevaba en el bolsillo un gran sobre lleno de papeles que había recibido por correo certificado. Tomaron el tren por un minuto y Chirac por unos segundos. Sin embargo, ni él ni Chirac parecían concebir el riesgo de inconveniencia e irritación que habían corrido. Chirac charlaba por la ventanilla con otro periodista que iba en el compartimento contiguo. Cuando Sofía tuvo ocasión de examinarlo, vio que sin duda debía de haber ido a su casa a ponerse ropa vieja. Todo el mundo, excepto ella y Gerald, iba, al parecer, con ropa vieja.

En el tren hacía calor, había mucho ruido y todo estaba lleno de polvo. Pero uno tras otro los tres se quedaron profunda y tranquilamente dormidos, como animales jóvenes sanos y extenuados. Nada podía molestarles más que un momento. A Sofía le pareció simple casualidad que Chirac se despertara y los despertara a ellos en Laroche, cogiera somnoliento la maleta de Sofía y los hiciera bajar al andén, donde bostezaron y sonrieron, invadidos por la satisfacción del descanso, honda y a medio realizar. En un puesto ambulante, sedientos, bebieron néctar ansiosamente, a tragos; suspiraron con alivio y placer y Gerald arrojó una moneda, rechazando el cambio con un gesto señorial. El tren local a Auxerre iba lleno, con un cargamento variado y siniestro. Corría el rumor de que el verdugo viajaba en el tren. Aunque el sol se estaba poniendo, el calor no parecía disminuir. Las actitudes se hicieron más desmadejadas, más negligentes. Por las ventanillas se colaban sin cesar hollín y un polvo picajoso. El tren se detuvo en Bonnard, Chemilly y Moneteau, cada vez delante de una multitud expectante que lo invadía. Y al final, en la gran estación de Auxerre, vomitó una increíble masa de humanidad mugrienta que se extendió sobre todas las cosas como una inundación. Sofía estaba asustada. Gerald dejó la iniciativa a Chirac, y Chirac la cogió del brazo y la condujo, volviendo la cabeza a ver si Gerald los seguía con la maleta. Daba la impresión de que en Auxerre reinaba el frenesí.

Un cochero les pidió diez francos por llevarlos al Hotel de l’Epée.

—¡Bah! —exclamó Chirac despectivamente en su calidad de parisiense experimentado que no se deja explotar por zopencos provincianos.

Pero el siguiente cochero pidió doce francos.

—Sube —dijo Gerald a Sofía. Chirac enarcó las cejas.

En el mismo momento, un hombre alto y robusto con el duro rostro de un próspero bribón y una muchacha pálida que iba de su brazo empujaron a Gerald y a Chirac y se metieron en el coche.

Chirac protestó, diciéndole que el coche estaba ya comprometido.

El usurpador torció el gesto y soltó una palabrota; la muchacha rió descaradamente.

Sofía, encogiéndose, pensó que su acompañante iba a hacer justicia de manera heroica y definitiva, pero se vio decepcionada.

—¡Qué bestia! —murmuró Chirac, encogiéndose de hombros, mientras el carruaje se alejaba, dejándolos como unos tontos en el bordillo de la acera.

Para entonces todos los demás coches estaban ocupados. Fueron andando al Hotel de l'Epée entre los empujones de la muchedumbre, Sofía y Chirac delante y Gerald detrás con la maleta, cuyo peso le hacía inclinarse a la derecha y levantar el brazo izquierdo. La avenida era larga y recta y el polvo en suspensión la tornaba neblinosa. Sofía tenía un agudo sentido de lo romántico. Veían torres y campanarios; Chirac le iba hablando pausadamente de la catedral y de las famosas iglesias. Dijo que las vidrieras eran maravillosas y con todo esmero le hizo un catálogo de todas las cosas que tenía que visitar. Cruzaron un río. Ella tenía la sensación de estar entrando en la Edad Media. De vez en cuando Gerald se cambiaba la maleta de mano; se negó obstinadamente a dejar que Chirac la tocara. Ascendieron trabajosamente por calles estrechas y retorcidas.

—*Voilá!* —dijo Chirac.

Se hallaban ante el Hotel de l'Epée. Al otro lado de la calle había un café atestado de gente. Delante había varios carruajes. El Hotel de l'Epée tenía una tranquilizadora apariencia de apacible respetabilidad, como había dicho Chirac. Había sugerido este hotel para la señora Scales porque no estaba cerca del lugar de la ejecución. Gerald había dicho: «¡Por supuesto! ¡Por supuesto!». Chirac, que no pensaba dormir, no pidió habitación para él.

El Hotel de l'Epée sólo tenía una habitación libre, al precio de veinticinco francos.

Gerald se rebeló contra aquel abuso.

—¡Sí que está bien —rezongó— que los viajeros normales no puedan conseguir una habitación decente a un precio decente sólo porque van a guillotinar a alguien mañana! ¡Probaremos en otra parte!

Sus rasgos expresaban indignación, pero Sofía se figuró que se sentía secretamente complacido.

Salieron con aire arrogante de la bulliciosa agitación del hotel, como harían quienes, habiéndose negado a dejarse estafar, desearan conservar su importancia ante la faz del mundo. En la calle, un cochero les ofreció sus servicios y les llenó de esperanzas diciéndoles que sabía de un hotel que podía convenirles y que los llevaría a él por cinco francos. Dio un furioso latigazo a su caballo. El mero hecho de estar en un carruaje que se movía con rapidez y que los viandantes tenían que evitar con ligereza los mantuvo de buen humor. Vieron de cerca la catedral. El coche se detuvo, dando una sacudida, en una placita, delante de un repelente edificio con un cartel que rezaba «Hotel de Vézelay». El caballo estaba sangrando. Gerald dio a Sofía instrucciones de quedarse donde estaba y él y Chirac subieron cuatro escalones y entraron en el hotel. Sofía, blanco de las miradas de los grupos de gente que paseaban por allí, miró en torno suyo y vio que todas las ventanas del edificio estaban abiertas y en su mayoría ocupadas por personas que charlaban y reían. Después oyó un grito: era la voz de Gerald. Había aparecido en una ventana del segundo piso del hotel con Chirac y una mujer muy gruesa. Chirac saludó y Gerald se rió con despreocupación e hizo una señal con la cabeza.

—Está bien —dijo cuando bajó.

—¿Cuánto piden? —inquirió Sofía indiscretamente.

Gerald vaciló y pareció cortado.

—Treinta y cinco francos —dijo—. Pero ya hemos dado bastantes vueltas. Según parece es una suerte que hayamos encontrado por lo menos esto.

Y Chirac se encogió de hombros, como indicando que era preciso aceptar la situación y el precio con filosofía. Gerald dio cinco francos al cochero. Éste examinó la moneda y exigió *pour-boire*[45].

—¡Oh! ¡Maldita sea! —exclamó Gerald; como no tenía suelto se desprendió de otros dos francos.

—¿Va a venir alguien por esta condenada maleta? —preguntó Gerald, como un tirano cuya ira estallaba instantáneamente si la plebe no se andaba con ojo.

Pero no salió nadie, de modo que se vio obligado a llevarla él mismo.

El hotel era oscuro y maloliente, y al parecer todas las habitaciones estaban llenas de risueños grupos de bebedores.

—Desde luego, no vamos a poder dormir los dos en esta cama —dijo Sofía cuando se vio a solas con Gerald en una habitación pequeña y mezquina.

—No creerás que pienso dormir, ¿verdad? —dijo Gerald con notable brusquedad—. Es para ti. Ahora vamos a comer. Aviva.

III

Era de noche. La joven yacía en la estrecha cama con cobertor carmesí. Las pesadas cortinas del mismo color de las ventanas estaban corridas, ocultando los sucios visillos de encaje, pero las luces de la plazuela se filtraban débilmente por los resquicios en la habitación. También penetraban los ruidos de la plaza, extraordinariamente fuertes y claros, pues el calor, que no había disminuido, la había obligado a dejar la ventana abierta. No podía dormir. Aunque estaba agotada, no tenía ninguna esperanza de poder dormir.

Una vez más se sentía profundamente deprimida. Recordaba la cena con horror. ¡Aquella larga y atestada mesa de extremos semicirculares, en el opresivo y hediondo comedor iluminado por lámparas de aceite! Habría lo menos cuarenta personas en aquella mesa. La mayoría de ellas comía de una forma repugnante, haciendo tanto ruido como los cerdos, con la punta de la grande y basta servilleta remetida en el cuello. Servían a todos la mujer gorda que había visto en la ventana con Gerald y una muchacha cuyo comportamiento era francamente descarado. Las dos tenían un aspecto abandonado. Todo estaba sucio. Pero la comida era buena. Chirac y Gerald coincidieron en que la comida era buena, como también el vino. *«¡Remarquable*[46]*!»,* dijo Chirac del vino. Sofía, sin embargo, no pudo comer ni beber con gusto. Estaba atemorizada. Aquella gente la asustaba ya sólo por sus gestos. Era muy heterogénea en su apariencia; algunos comensales vestían bien, casi con elegancia, y otros pobremente. Pero todos los rostros, hasta los más juveniles, eran brutales, corruptos y desvergonzados. La yuxtaposición de hombres viejos y mujeres jóvenes le resultaba odiosa, sobre todo cuando aquellas parejas se besaban, cosa que hacían con frecuencia cerca del final de la comida. Por suerte estaba sentada entre Chirac y Gerald. Aquella disposición parecía protegerla incluso de la conversación. No habría entendido nada de no ser por la presencia de un inglés de mediana edad que estaba en el extremo de enfrente de la mesa junto a una francesa elegante y aún joven que Sofía había visto en Sylvain la noche anterior. El inglés, evidentemente, le había prometido enseñarle su lengua. Le traducía al inglés cuanto se decía, despacio y con claridad, y ella repetía cada frase haciendo extrañas contorsiones con la boca.

Así Sofía pudo colegir que la conversación versaba exclusivamente sobre asesinatos, ejecuciones, criminales y verdugos. Algunos de los presentes tenían la costumbre de acudir a todas las ejecuciones. Eran un manantial de chismorreos interesantes y el centro de atención de la mesa. Había una mujer que recordaba las últimas palabras de todas las víctimas de la justicia en veinte años. Hubo una tempestad de histéricas carcajadas entre los comensales motivada por una de las anécdotas de aquella mujer. Sofía se enteró de que había contado cómo un criminal había dicho al sacerdote, que por natural bondad trataba de impedirle la visión de la guillotina tapándola con su cuerpo: «Apártese ahora, párroco. ¿Acaso no he pagado para verla?». Así lo tradujo el inglés. Se debatieron los salarios de los verdugos y sus ayudantes y las diferencias de opinión se convirtieron en violentas discusiones. Un tipo joven con aire de lechuguino narró, como un hecho del que estaba dispuesto a dar fe con una pistola, que Cora Pearl, la célebre cortesana inglesa, había conseguido, merced a su influencia sobre un prefecto de policía, visitar a solas a un criminal en su celda en la noche anterior a su ejecución, y que había estado con él hasta una hora antes de la citación final. La historia obtuvo los honores de la cena. Se consideró verdaderamente impresionante y de forma inevitable condujo a la

interrogación general: ¿qué vieron los más altos personajes del imperio en aquella inglesa pelirroja? Y, por supuesto, Rivain, el apuesto homicida, centro y héroe de la fiesta, no fue olvidado mucho tiempo en la conversación. Varios de los comensales lo habían visto; uno o dos lo conocían y pudieron dar asombrosos detalles de sus proezas como vividor. A pesar de su crimen, parecía ser objeto de una sincera idolatría. Se dijo de forma taxativa que se había prometido a una sobrina de su víctima un lugar preferente en la ejecución.

Acerca de esto dedujo Sofía, para su profunda sorpresa y alarma, que la cárcel estaba cercana y que la ejecución tendría lugar en la esquina de la misma plaza en que estaba el hotel. Gerald lo sabía sin duda y se lo había ocultado. Le echó una mirada de reojo, con desconfianza. Conforme la cena se acercaba se fue desmoronando la actitud de tranquilo, desinteresado y científico observador de la humanidad que había adoptado Gerald. Ya no podía mantenerla ante la creciente licencia de la escena en torno a la mesa. Finalmente se sentía un tanto avergonzado por haber expuesto a su mujer al espectáculo de semejante orgía; su inquieta mirada se cuidaba bien de evitar la de Sofía y la de Chirac. Éste, cuyo sencillo y natural interés por el asunto había ayudado a Sofía más que ninguna otra cosa a conservar la compostura, observó el cambio de Gerald y el extremo malestar de Sofía y sugirió que dejaran la mesa sin esperar el café. Gerald accedió inmediatamente. Así se había librado Sofía del horror de aquella cena. No comprendía cómo un hombre tan amable y reflexivo como Chirac —le había dado las buenas noches con la cortesía más distinguida —podía tolerar y mucho menos paladear con gusto la disipación glotona, borracha y salaz del Hotel de Vézelay, pero su teoría era, hasta donde ella podía juzgar por su imperfecto inglés, que todo lo existente había de ser admitido y valorado por personas serias interesadas en el estudio de la naturaleza humana. Su rostro parecía decir: «¿por qué no?». Su rostro parecía decirles a Gerald y a ella: «Si os incomoda, ¿a qué vinisteis?».

Gerald la había dejado en la puerta de la habitación con una tímida inclinación de cabeza. Ella se desvistió parcialmente y se echó, y al instante el hotel se transformó en una especie de caja de resonancia. Era como si, por debajo y por dentro de todos los ruidos de la plaza, todos los movimientos del hotel llegaran a sus oídos atravesando paredes de cartón: gritos y risas distantes, abajo; ruido de cacharros también abajo; pasos que subían y bajaban por las escaleras; movimientos furtivos y deslizantes igualmente subiendo y bajando por las escaleras; bruscas llamadas, fragmentos de canciones, largos suspiros súbitamente ahogados, misteriosos gemidos como de tortura, interrumpidos por una risilla, peleas y discusiones, de nada se libró en aquella oscuridad extrañamente sonora.

Después se elevó de la plaza gran tumulto y conmoción, entre gritos, y por debajo de éstos un confuso estrépito. En vano apretó el rostro contra la almohada y escuchó el ruido irregular y prodigioso de sus pestañas al rozar la tela. De uno u otro modo se le había metido en la cabeza la idea de que tenía que levantarse e ir a la ventana a ver todo lo que hubiera que ver. Se resistió. Se dijo que era una idea absurda, que no *deseaba* ir a la ventana. No obstante, mientras discutía consigo misma sabía bien que era inútil resistirse a aquella idea y que al final sus piernas obedecerían su mandato.

Cuando por fin sucumbió a la fascinación y se acercó a la ventana y descorrió una de las cortinas, sintió una sensación de alivio.

En el cielo se anunciaba un frío y gris amanecer y todos los detalles de la plaza eran visibles. Todas las ventanas sin excepción estaban abiertas de par en par y llenas de espectadores. Al fondo de muchas ardían velas o lámparas que la lenta aproximación del sol iba matando ya. Delante de aquellas ventanas, allí donde se mezclaban dos luces, se perfilaban curiosamente las atentas figuras de los espectadores. Los tejados de rojas tejas estaban también invadidos. Abajo, una tropa de gendarmes, montados en caballos caracoleantes extendidos en línea a través de la plaza, barría poco a poco de toda ella a una muchedumbre compacta, gesticulante y maldiciente. La actuación de aquel inmenso escobón era muy lenta. Conforme los espacios de la plaza se despejaban, empezaron a ser ocupados por personas privilegiadas desperdigadas, periodistas, funcionarios de la ley o sus amigos, que iban de acá para allá muy pagados de sí mismos; entre ellos distinguió Sofía a Gerald y a Chirac paseando del brazo y charlando con dos muchachas de elaborada vestimenta y también cogidas del brazo.

Después vio un reflejo rojo procedente de una de las calles laterales que alcanzaba a ver; era la balanceante linterna de un carromato arrastrado por un descarnado caballo gris. El vehículo se detuvo en el extremo de la plaza por el que había empezado el escobón y fue inmediatamente rodeado por los privilegiados, a quienes sin embargo pronto se convenció de que se apartaran. La multitud se apiñó entonces en las principales entradas a la plaza, profirió un grito formidable y prorrumpió en el estribillo:

Le voilá!

Nicolás!

Ah! Ah! Ah![47]

El clamor se tornó furioso cuando un grupo de obreros con blusas azules sacaron del carromato, pieza por pieza, todos los componentes de la guillotina y los pusieron cuidadosamente en el suelo bajo la supervisión de un hombre con levita negra y sombrero de seda de alas anchas y planas, un hombre un tanto inquieto que gesticulaba nerviosamente. Y luego plantaron derechas sobre el suelo las columnas rojas y un escalador acrobático las unió en su parte superior. Cuando cada parte se sujetaba y atornillaba a la máquina, que iba creciendo, el hombre del sombrero de copa la comprobaba con todo esmero. En un corto tiempo que pareció muy largo la guillotina estuvo concluida con excepción de la hoja triangular de acero, que se hallaba, centro de todas las miradas, en el suelo. El verdugo la señaló y dos hombres la cogieron, la deslizaron en su ranura y la elevaron a lo alto de la máquina. El verdugo clavó en ella una mirada interminable en medio de un silencio universal. Después activó el mecanismo y la masa metálica cayó produciendo un ruido sordo, amortiguado y reverberante. Se oyeron algunos débiles chillidos al unísono y después un estruendoso barullo de vítores, gritos, silbidos y ráfagas de cantos. La hoja se elevó de nuevo, creando de nuevo un silencio de inmediato, y de nuevo cayó, dando curso a una nueva demencia. El verdugo hizo un movimiento de satisfacción. En las ventanas, numerosas mujeres aplaudieron con entusiasmo; los gendarmes tuvieron que luchar brutalmente con la feroz presión de la muchedumbre. Los obreros se quitaron las blusas y se pusieron chaquetas; Sofía se sintió perturbada al verlos acercarse en fila india al hotel, seguidos por el verdugo del sombrero de seda.

IV

En el Hotel de Vézelay hubo mucho ruido de puertas que se abrían y muchos susurros en el umbral cuando el verdugo y sus ayudantes hicieron su solemne entrada. Sofía oyó cómo subían pesadamente la escalera; vacilaron al parecer y luego entraron en una habitación del mismo rellano que la de Sofía. Se oyó un portazo. Pero a Sofía le llegaba el sonido regular de nuevas voces hablando y luego un ruido de vasos en una bandeja. La conversación procedente de las ventanas del hotel mostraba ahora una excitación mucho mayor. No podía ver a las personas que ocupaban aquellas ventanas próximas sin dejar ver su cabeza y no quería hacer tal cosa. Vibró sobre los tejados de la plaza el estrépito de una gran campana que daba la hora; supuso que tal vez fuera el reloj de la catedral. Vio en una esquina de la plaza a Gerald, solo, hablando animadamente con una de las muchachas que antes iban juntas. Se preguntó vagamente cómo se habría criado aquella muchacha y qué pensaban sus padres... o sabían. Y tuvo consciencia de un profundo orgullo de sí misma, de un sentimiento de superioridad inconmensurablemente altivo.

Su mirada se encontró de nuevo con la guillotina y permaneció fija en ella. Guardada por unos gendarmes, aquel alto y sencillo objeto dominaba amenazadoramente la plaza con sus toscas columnas rojas. En el suelo, a su lado, había unas herramientas y una caja larga abierta. El débil caballo del carromato parecía dormitar sobre sus patas torcidas. En aquel momento, los primeros rayos del sol se proyectaron longitudinalmente atravesando la plaza a la altura de las chimeneas; Sofía se dio cuenta de que se habían apagado casi todas las lámparas y velas. Muchos de los ocupantes de las ventanas bostezaban, y después de bostezar reían tontamente. Unos comían y bebían; otros sostenían conversaciones a voces de una casa a otra. Los gendarmes montados continuaban empujando hacia atrás a las febriles multitudes, que gruñían en todas las entradas a la plaza. Vio a Chirac, que se paseaba solo de un lado a otro. Pero no pudo encontrar a Gerald. No podía haber salido de la plaza. Quizá hubiera vuelto al hotel y subiría a ver si estaba cómoda y si necesitaba algo. Con una sensación de culpabilidad se echó de nuevo en la cama. La última vez que había revisado la habitación estaba sumida en la oscuridad; ahora había luz y todos los detalles se dejaban ver con claridad. Sin embargo tenía la impresión de haber estado sólo unos pocos minutos junto a la ventana.

Aguardó. Pero Gerald no apareció. Oía sobre todo el zumbido constante de las voces del verdugo y sus ayudantes. Pensó que la habitación en la que estaban se hallaba sin duda en la parte de atrás. Los demás sonidos del hotel se fueron haciendo menos perceptibles. Después, pasado un siglo, oyó abrirse una puerta y una voz baja que decía autoritariamente algo en francés, y luego un *«oui, monsieur»,* y a todo el mundo bajando la escalera. Los verdugos y sus ayudantes se iban. «Usted —exclamó una beoda voz inglesa desde un piso alto; era el inglés de mediana edad traduciendo lo que había dicho el verdugo—, usted le cortará la cabeza». Luego, una risotada grosera y la voz de la chica del inglés, que proseguía con su estudio de la lengua: «Usted le cogtagá la cabesa. Sí, señog». Y otra risotada. Finalmente reinó el silencio en el hotel. Sofía se dijo:

«¡No me moveré de esta cama hasta que todo haya terminado y vuelva Gerald!».

Se quedó adormilada bajo la sábana y la despertó un tremendo griterío: un fenómeno de bestialidad humana que sobrepasaba con mucho la limitada experiencia de Sofía. Aunque estaba encerrada en una habitación, en total seguridad, la furia demente de aquella muchedumbre, plantada en las entradas a la plaza, la hizo estremecer y la intimidó. Parecía como si fueran capaces de hacer pedazos incluso a los caballos. «Tengo que quedarme donde estoy», murmuró. Y aun diciendo esto se levantó, volvió a la ventana y miró al exterior. La tortura que aquello le ocasionaba era extrema, pero no tuvo fuerzas para resistirse a la fascinación. Miró ansiosamente a la luminosa plaza. Lo primero que vio fue a Gerald saliendo de una casa de enfrente, seguido a los pocos segundos por la muchacha con la que estaba antes hablando. Gerald echó un apresurado vistazo a la fachada del hotel y luego se acercó todo lo que pudo a las columnas rojas, delante de las cuales se había colocado ahora una fila de gendarmes con los sables desenvainados. Otro carromato, más grande y con dos caballos, aguardaba al lado del primero. La bulla más allá de la plaza continuaba e incluso iba en aumento. Pero el par de centenares de personas que estaban dentro de los cordones y todos los ocupantes de las ventanas, borrachos y sobrios, tenían la vista clavada, como por un siniestro encantamiento, en el sitio de la guillotina, al igual que Sofía. «¡No puedo soportarlo!», se dijo horrorizada; pero no podía moverse; ni siquiera podía mover los ojos.

De vez en cuando, la multitud estallaba en un violento s*taccato:*

Le voilá!

Nicolás!

Ah! Ah! Ah!

Y el último *«Ah!»* era diabólico.

Después retumbó contra el cielo un gigantesco rugido apasionado, culminación del feroz salvajismo del populacho. La fila de caballos enloquecidos giró bruscamente y se encabritó, y pareció que iba a caer encima de la furiosa multitud mientras los gendarmes, quietos como estatuas, se mecían sobre ellos. Fue un último esfuerzo por romper el cordón y fracasó.

En la callecita que salía detrás de la guillotina apareció un sacerdote que caminaba hacia atrás y portaba un crucifijo en alto en la mano derecha; tras él venía el apuesto héroe, con todo el cuerpo cruzado por cuerdas y entre dos guardianes, que se apretaban contra él y lo sostenían por ambos lados. Era verdaderamente muy joven. Levantaba la barbilla valerosamente, pero su rostro estaba increíblemente pálido. Sofía vio que el sacerdote trataba de ocultar con su cuerpo al preso la visión de la guillotina, como en el relato que había oído en la cena.

Con excepción de la voz del sacerdote, que se elevaba y descendía ininteligiblemente con la oración por el que iba a morir, no se oía sonido alguno en la plaza ni en sus alrededores. Las ventanas estaban ahora ocupadas por grupos convertidos en piedra, con los ojos desorbitados y fijos en la pequeña procesión. Sofía tenía un nudo en la garganta y la mano que sujetaba la cortina temblaba. La figura principal no le parecía viva, sino un muñeco, una marioneta a la que se hubiera dado cuerda para imitar la acción de una tragedia. Vio cómo el sacerdote presentaba el crucifijo a la boca de la marioneta, que lo rechazó con un torpe e inhumano empellón de sus hombros atados. Y cuando la procesión giró y se detuvo vio claramente que la marioneta tenía la nuca y los hombros desnudos, pues le habían hecho una raja en la camisa. Era horrible. «¿Por qué estoy aquí?», se preguntó histéricamente. Pero no se movió. La víctima había desaparecido ahora en medio de un grupo de hombres. Después lo distinguió de bruces bajo las columnas, entre las ranuras. Sólo rompía ahora el silencio el tintineo de los frenos de los caballos, en las esquinas de la plaza. Los gendarmes alineados delante del patíbulo sujetaron con fuerza los sables y dirigieron la mirada por encima de la nariz, sin hacer caso de los grupos privilegiados que atisbaban casi por entre los hombros de uno y otro.

Y Sofía esperó, horrorizada. No veía más que el brillante triángulo de metal suspendido muy alto sobre la víctima, que aguardaba de bruces. Se sentía como un alma en pena, arrancada demasiado pronto de su cobijo y expuesta para siempre a los peores azares del destino. ¿Por qué se hallaba en aquella ciudad extraña e incomprensible, ajena y hostil a ella, contemplando con mirada angustiada aquel cruel y obsceno espectáculo? Su sensibilidad era una sangrante masa de heridas. ¿Por qué? Ayer mismo era un ser tímido e inocente en Bursley, en Axe, un ser estúpido que creía que esconder cartas era lo más apasionante del mundo. O el día de ayer o el de hoy eran irreales. ¿Por qué estaba prisionera, sola, en aquel hotel odioso, indescriptiblemente

odioso, sin nadie que la tranquilizara y consolara y se la llevara de allí?

El lejano reloj dio una campanada. Entonces una voz pronunció un monosílabo, una voz estridente y nerviosa; reconoció la voz del verdugo, cuyo nombre había oído pero no podía recordar. Se produjo un ruido metálico...

Se dejó caer al suelo, encogida, llena de espanto y repugnancia; escondió el rostro y se estremeció. Desde las distintas ventanas resonaron en sus oídos un chillido tras otro, como una descarga; después, el loco alarido de la muchedumbre cercada, que, al igual que ella, no lo había visto pero lo había oído, extinguió todos los demás ruidos. Se había hecho justicia. La gran ambición de la vida de Gerald había quedado por fin satisfecha.

V

Después, entre la agitación del hotel, llamaron a la puerta con impaciencia y nerviosismo. Olvidando en su tribulación que no llevaba puesto el corpiño del vestido se levantó, como en una especie de sueño espantoso, y abrió. En el descansillo estaba Chirac sujetando a Gerald por el brazo. Chirac parecía gastado, curiosamente frágil y patético, pero Gerald era la imagen misma de la muerte. El cumplimiento de su ambición había destruido por completo su equilibrio; había resultado ser más fuerte que su estómago. Sofía habría sentido piedad por él si en aquel momento hubiera sido capaz de sentir piedad. Gerald entró en la habitación con paso vacilante y se hundió con un gemido en la cama. Hacía bien poco estaba conversando orgullosamente con mujeres impúdicas. Ahora, velozmente derrumbado, estaba tan fláccido como un perro enfermo y era tan repugnante como un viejo borracho.

—Está un poco *souffrant*[48] —dijo débilmente Chirac.

Sofía captó en el tono de Chirac que daba por hecho que era deber de ella en aquel momento dedicarse a la tarea de devolver a su avergonzado esposo su orgullo varonil.

«¿Y yo qué?», pensó amargamente.

La mujer gorda subió la escalera como un merengue tambaleante y se puso a parlotear a Sofía, que no entendió nada en absoluto.

—Quiere sesenta francos —dijo Chirac, y en respuesta a la sorprendida pregunta de Sofía explicó que Gerald había accedido a pagar cien francos por la habitación, que era la de la propia dueña: cincuenta por anticipado y cincuenta después de la ejecución. Los otros diez eran por la cena. La dueña, que desconfiaba de todos sus clientes, estaba cobrando sus cuentas no bien concluido el espectáculo.

Sofía no hizo observación alguna en cuanto a la mentira que le había contado Gerald. Incluso Chirac lo había oído. Ella sabía que Gerald era un redomado embustero con los demás, pero se sorprendió ingenuamente cuando hizo lo mismo con ella.

—¡Gerald! ¿Lo oyes? —le dijo fríamente.

El aficionado a las cabezas cortadas se limitó a gemir.

Con un movimiento de irritación Sofía se acercó a él y le tocó los bolsillos buscando el monedero; él hizo un gesto de asentimiento sin dejar de gemir. Chirac la ayudó a elegir y contar las monedas.

La mujer gorda, tranquilizada, siguió su camino.

—¡Adiós, *madame!* —dijo Chirac con su habitual cortesía, transformando el rellano del odioso hotel en una especie de antecámara imperial.

—¿Se va? —inquirió ella sorprendida. Su disgusto era tan evidente que él se sintió enormemente halagado. Se quedaría si pudiera. Pero tenía que regresar a París para escribir y entregar su artículo.

—¡Hasta mañana, espero! —murmuró cordialmente, besándole la mano. El gesto compensó un tanto la sordidez de la situación de Sofía e incluso corrigió los defectos de su vestimenta. Después de aquello siempre

tuvo la impresión de que Chirac era un viejo e íntimo amigo; había superado con éxito la prueba de ver el «otro lado» de la materia de la que estaba hecha su vida.

Cerró la puerta al salir él, con una prolongada mirada, y se reconcilió con su apurada situación.

Gerald dormía. Se había quedado profundamente dormido tal como estaba.

¡A esto era a lo que la había llevado, pues! ¡Qué horrores los de aquella noche, de aquel amanecer y de aquella mañana! ¡Un sufrimiento y una humillación indecibles; una angustia y una tortura que nunca podría olvidar! ¡Y después de una fatua velada de insospechada licencia había vuelto corriendo, como una alimaña, a pasar el día durmiendo en aquella sucia habitación! Ni siquiera tenía el coraje de hacer el papel de juerguista hasta el final. Y ella estaba ligada a él; muy lejos de toda ayuda humana; irrevocablemente aislada por su orgullo de quienes tal vez la hubieran protegido de su peligrosa necedad. Desde aquel momento constituyó parte permanente de su conciencia general la profunda convicción de que no era más que un estúpido irresponsable e irreflexivo. Carecía de *sentido*. ¡Ése era su brillante y divino esposo, el hombre que le había conferido el derecho a llamarse mujer casada! Era un estúpido. A pesar de toda su ignorancia del mundo veía que nadie más que un redomado imbécil podía haberla llevado a aquel extremo. Su innata sagacidad se rebeló. La acometieron ráfagas de sentimiento durante las cuales hubiera sido muy capaz de obligarle a golpes a hacer frente a sus responsabilidades.

Del bolsillo superior de su manchada chaqueta sobresalía el paquete que había recibido el día anterior. Si no lo había perdido ya sólo se lo debía a la buena suerte. Lo cogió. Eran doscientas libras en billetes de banco ingleses, una carta de un banquero y otros papeles. Cuidando de no hacer ruido rompió el sobre y los papeles en trozos pequeños y luego buscó un sitio para esconderlos. Un aparador le pareció apropiado. Se subió a una silla y ocultó a la vista los fragmentos en el estante más alto, donde puede que sigan todavía. Acabó de vestirse y luego cosió los billetes en el forro de su falda. No tenía ideas tontas y delicadas acerca del robo. Percibía oscuramente que dependiendo de un hombre como Gerald podría encontrarse en los dilemas más monstruosos, más imposibles. Aquellos billetes, seguros y secretos en su falda, le daban confianza, la hacían sentirse segura en cuanto a los peligros del futuro y le otorgaban independencia. El acto era característico de su iniciativa y de su fundamental prudencia. Y su conciencia defendía con calor su rectitud.

Decidió que cuando descubriera la pérdida se limitaría a negar todo conocimiento de la existencia del sobre, pues no le había dicho una palabra de él. Él nunca aludía a cuestiones de dinero; poseía una fortuna. Sin embargo no se presentó la necesidad de decir esta mentira. No hizo mención alguna de la pérdida. El hecho fue que pensó que había sido tan descuidado como para dejar que se lo birlaran durante los excesos de la noche.

Todo el día, hasta la tarde, lo pasó Sofía sentada en una mugrienta silla mientras Gerald dormía. No cesaba de repetirse, en su atónito resentimiento: «¡Cien francos por esta habitación! ¡Cien francos! ¡Y no tuvo valor para decírmelo!». No podía expresar su desprecio.

Mucho antes de que por puro aburrimiento se acercase de nuevo a mirar por la ventana se había borrado de la plaza toda señal de justicia. No quedaba nada bajo la intensa luz de agosto salvo los montones de porquería donde los caballos habían estado caracoleando y encabritándose.

Capitulo IV

GERALD EN CRISIS

I

Durante un tiempo persistió en la mente de Gerald y de Sofía la extraordinaria idea de que doce mil libras representaba la riqueza en toda su infinitud, que dicha cantidad poseía unas especiales propiedades mágicas que la hacían insensible al proceso de la resta. Parecía imposible que doce mil libras, aunque disminuyeran constantemente, pudieran acabar desapareciendo por completo. Persistió más tiempo en la mente de Gerald que en la de Sofía, pues Gerald nunca se paraba a contemplar los hechos molestos, mientras que tales fenómenos fascinaban morbosamente la mirada de Sofía. En una vida dedicada s los viajes y los placeres, Gerald se proponía no gastar más de seiscientas libras al año, los intereses de su fortuna. Seiscientas al año es menos de dos libras al día, pero Gerald nunca pagaba menos de dos libras al día sólo en facturas de hotel. Esperaba estar viviendo por mil al año, tenía el secreto temor de estar gastando mil quinientas y en realidad estaba gastando unas dos mil quinientas. No obstante, la extraordinaria idea de que las doce mil libras eran inagotables siempre le tranquilizaba. Cuanto más deprisa se iba el dinero más vigorosamente prosperaba aquella idea en la mente de Gerald. Cuando las doce se redujeron inexplicablemente a tres, Gerald decidió que tenía que actuar y en pocos meses perdió dos mil en la Bolsa de París. La aventura le asustó y presa del pánico esparció otras doscientas en un frenesí de vida regalada.

Pero incluso cuando le quedaban veinte mil francos de trescientos mil se seguía aferrando a la creencia de que en su caso habría de una u otra manera una suspensión de las leyes naturales. Había oído hablar de hombres antaño ricos que mendigaban pan y barrían las calles, pero estaba completamente seguro contra esos peligros por la simple virtud del axioma de que él era él. Sin embargo se proponía ayudar al axioma haciendo esfuerzos para ganar dinero. Cuando éstos continuaron fracasando trató de ayudar al axioma pidiendo dinero prestado, pero se encontró con que su tío había terminado definitivamente con él. Habría ayudado al axioma robando, pero no tenía valor ni conocimientos para ser un estafador; ni siquiera era lo bastante experto para engañar jugando a las cartas.

Antes pensaba en miles. Ahora empezó a pensar en cientos, en decenas, cada día y cada hora. Pagó doscientos francos en billetes de tren para vivir económicamente en un pueblo y poco después otros doscientos para vivir económicamente en París. Y para celebrar la llegada a París y el definitivo comienzo de una era de estricta economía y de seria búsqueda de un modo de vida, gastó cien francos en una cena en la Maison Dorée y dos entradas de paraíso en el Gymnase. En suma, no omitió nada —ninguna acción, ninguna resolución, ningún autoengaño— de lo que hace el típico estúpido en su situación, siempre convencido de que sus dificultades y su sabiduría eran totalmente excepcionales.

En mayo de 1870, una tarde, deambulaba nerviosamente por una habitación de tres esquinas en un hotelito situado en el ángulo de la Rue Fontaine y la Rue Laval (actualmente Rue Víctor Massé), a medio minuto del bulevar de Clichy. ¡A aquello había llegado: a cambiar el *grand boulevard* por el *boulevard extérieur!* Sofía estaba sentada en una astrosa silla junto a la ventana, contemplando con ociosa repugnancia la vida que bullía en el ómnibus Clichy-Odeón, que soltaba su caballo delantero en la esquina de la Rue Chaptal. El ruido del insignificante y apresurado tránsito en las piedras del pavimento era ensordecedor. No era aquella una ubicación que correspondiera a un ideal. Había demasiada humanidad apiñada en aquellas calles estrechas y empinadas; hasta parecía rebosar de las ventanas de las altas casas. Gerald curaba su orgullo diciendo que, al fin y al cabo, aquél era el auténtico París y que la cocina era tan buena como en cualquier otra parte, se pague lo que se pague. Rara vez comía en los pequeños salones del primer piso sin hacer entusiastas referencias a la cocina. Cualquiera que le oyera pensaría que había elegido aquel hotel por sus méritos superlativos, no por consideraciones monetarias. Y con su aire de estar al cabo de la calle parecía un conocedor de París que no quería juntarse con el rebaño de los turistas vulgares en los rediles del barrio de la Madeleine. Vestía con cierta distinción; la buena ropa, puesta a prueba, sobrevive a los cambios de fortuna como un arco romano sobrevive al lujo del imperio desaparecido. Sólo sus cuellos, de parte delantera en forma de V, y sus puños, que llevaban los signos imborrables de la lavandería barata, reflejaban la sombra del inminente desastre.

Miró a Sofía de través, furtivamente. También ella vestía con distinción; en su vestido de *faille* negro, el chal de cachemir y el sombrerito negro con su velo no había síntoma alguno de pobreza. Se la habría tomado por una de esas mujeres que se conforman con poca ropa pero buena y, con mucha ayuda de la

naturaleza, sacan mucho de poco. La ropa negra buena dura una eternidad; no descubre secretos de modificaciones y arreglos y no es transparente.

Por fin Gerald, reanudando una conversación interrumpida, exclamó con obstinación, por decirlo de alguna manera:

—¡Te digo que no tengo ni cinco francos por junto! Y puedes registrarme los bolsillos si quieres —añadió el embustero impenitente que había en él, temiendo la incredulidad de Sofía.

—Bien, ¿y qué esperas que haga yo? —inquirió Sofía.

El acento, a un tiempo irónico y apático, mostraba que habían sucedido a Sofía cosas extrañas y vitales en los cuatro años transcurridos desde su matrimonio. Ella tenía incluso la sensación de que la Sofía con la que se había casado Gerald estaba muerta y desaparecida y que otra Sofía había entrado en su cuerpo, tan consciente era del cambio fundamental operado en ella bajo la presión de la continua experiencia. Y aunque todo esto no era más que una apariencia, aunque seguía siendo la misma Sofía, más plenamente descubierta, era una apariencia verdadera. Indiscutiblemente más hermosa que cuando Gerald la convirtió mal de su grado en su esposa legítima, tenía casi veinticuatro años y quizá aparentaba algunos más. Su constitución era más sólida, su cintura más ancha, ni delgada ni gruesa. Sus labios eran bastante duros y tenía la costumbre de apretarlos ante la misma provocación que hace que un caracol se meta en la concha. No quedaba rastro de inmaduro desgarbo en sus gestos ni de sencillez en su entonación. Era una mujer de un encanto imperioso y un poco arrogante, en lo más mínimo el encanto de la inocencia y la ingenuidad. Tenía los ojos de alguien que ha perdido sus ilusiones de una manera demasiado violenta y total. Su mirada, fríamente comprensiva, insinuaba una familiaridad con la abyección de la naturaleza humana. Gerald había comenzado y concluido su educación. No la había estropeado, como un mal profesor estropea una buena voz, porque la fuerza moral de ella era inconmensurablemente mayor que la suya; sin darse cuenta había producido una obra maestra, pero era una obra maestra trágica. Sofía era una mujer que con una simple mirada al expresar una opinión podía hacer que un hombre se dijera a sí mismo, en parte deseoso y en parte alarmado por si ella le adivina, «¡Caramba! Deben de haberle pasado unas cuantas cosas. ¡Sabe lo que son las personas!».

La boda, ni qué decir tiene, había sido una desastrosa insensatez. Desde los mismos comienzos, desde el momento en que el viajante de comercio, con la fatuidad de una osadía incomparable, le tiró la pelotita de papel por encima del mostrador, el sentido común de Sofía, que iba despertando, le había dicho que al ceder a su instinto estaba sembrando desdicha y vergüenza para sí misma; pero había seguido adelante, como si estuviese embrujada. Había sido precisa la irrevocabilidad de la huida de su casa para que el hechizo empezara a romperse. Una vez hubo salido totalmente del trance, había reconocido su matrimonio como lo que era realmente. No había sacado ni el mejor partido ni el peor; había aceptado a Gerald como se acepta el clima. Veía una y otra vez que era un memo y un prodigio de irresponsabilidad. Lo toleraba —ya con dulzura, ya amargamente— siempre aceptando sus caprichos y sin permitirse a sí misma tener deseos propios. Estaba dispuesta a pagar el precio del orgullo y de la imbecilidad de un momento con toda una vida de represión de sí misma. Era un precio muy alto, pero era el que tenía que pagar. Nada había conseguido salvo un conocimiento excepcionalmente bueno de la lengua francesa (pronto aprendió a despreciar la manera en que Gerald la maltrataba gárrulamente) y nada había conservado salvo su dignidad. Sabía que Gerald estaba harto de ella, que bailaría de alegría si se librase de ella, que le era infiel constantemente, que hacía ya mucho que su belleza no le agitaba. Sabía también que en el fondo le tenía un poco de miedo; esto era su único consuelo moral. Lo que en ocasiones le resultaba sorprendente era que no la hubiese abandonado, que, sencilla y cruelmente, no se hubiese marchado un buen día olvidando llevarla consigo.

Se odiaban, pero de maneras distintas. Ella lo aborrecía y para él era una molestia.

—¿Que qué espero que hagas? —repitió Gerald—. ¿Por qué no escribes a casa, a tu familia, y les sacas algún dinero?

Ahora que había dicho lo que le rondaba por la cabeza, se plantó frente a ella con el aire intimidador de un fanfarrón. De haber sido más alto podría haber intentado intimidarla físicamente. Una de las numerosas razones para que fuera una molestia para él radicaba en que era la más alta de los dos.

Sofía no respondió.

—Bueno, no hace falta que te pongas pálida y empieces otra vez a armar todo ese jaleo. Lo que te sugiero es una cosa perfectamente razonable. Si no tengo dinero, es que no lo tengo. No puedo inventármelo.

Ella percibió que estaba dispuesto a embarcarse en una de sus periódicas y tempestuosas peleas. Pero aquel día estaba demasiado cansada e indispuesta para pelearse. El aviso de que no repitiera el «jaleo» aludía

a los vahídos gástricos que padecía desde hacía dos años. Por lo general la acometían después de comer. No llegaba a desvanecerse, pero la cabeza le daba vueltas y no podía tenerse en pie. Se dejaba caer allí donde estaba y, con el rostro alarmantemente pálido, murmuraba débilmente «mis sales». Al cabo de cinco minutos el ataque había pasado sin dejar huella. Había sufrido uno después del almuerzo. A él le molestaba aquella dolencia. Detestaba verse obligado a alcanzarle el frasco de sales y habría evitado hacerlo si no fuera porque aquella palidez siempre le alarmaba. Ninguna otra cosa le convencía de que los ataques no fueran una artimaña para impresionarle. Su actitud suponía invariablemente que ella podría curar su enfermedad si quisiera, pero que no lo hacía por obstinación.

—¿Vas a tener la decencia de contestar a mi pregunta o no?

—¿A qué pregunta? —Su voz vibrante era baja y contenida.

—¿Escribirás a tu familia?

—¿Para pedir dinero?

El sarcasmo que había en su tono era diabólico. No hubiera podido evitarlo; ni siquiera lo intentó. Poco le importaba que suscitase furia en él. ¿Acaso se imaginaba en serio que sería capaz de ponerse de rodillas ante su familia? ¿Ella? ¿Es que no sabía que su esposa era la mujer más orgullosa y obstinada de la tierra, que todo su comportamiento con él era la expresión de su orgullo y de su obstinación? Aun sintiéndose enferma y débil reunía todas las fuerzas de su carácter para defender su resolución de no comer jamás el pan de la humillación. Estaba absolutamente decidida a estar muerta para su familia. Cierto era que, algunos años antes, había visto tarjetas de navidad inglesas en una tienda de la Rue de Rivoli y, en un súbito arrebato de ternura hacia Constanza, había enviado una a su hermana y a su madre. Y una vez iniciada la costumbre había continuado con ella. No era pedir un favor; era hacerlo. Pero con excepción de la carta anual estaba muerta para la Plaza de San Lucas. Era una de esas hijas que desaparecen y ya no se habla de ellas en el círculo familiar. La consideración de su enorme insensatez, su ternura al pensar en Constanza, alguna pasajera remembranza, llena de involuntaria admiración, de un gesto regio de su madre, no conseguían sino fortalecerla contra todo género de resurrección después de aquella muerte.

¡Y él la apremiaba a que escribiese a su familia pidiéndole dinero! Si ni siquiera en todo su esplendor había hecho una visita a la Plaza de San Lucas. Jamás debían enterarse de lo que había sufrido! ¡Y menos que nadie la tía Harriet, a quien había robado!

—¿Escribirás a tu familia? —volvió él a preguntarle, acentuando y separando cada palabra.

—No —contestó lacónicamente, con terrible desdén.

—¿Por qué no?

—Porque no quiero. —La manera en que torció el gesto al juntar los labios dijo todo lo demás; todas las crueles verdades sobre las indecibles, inanes y groseras necedades de aquel hombre, su mala fe, su truculencia, su imprevisión, su vergonzoso derroche y la destrucción de su vida y de la de ella. Sofía dudaba de que fuera consciente de su bajeza y de los agravios de que la hacía objeto, pero si no era capaz de verlos en su callada afrenta, ella era demasiado orgullosa para recitárselos. Nunca se había quejado, salvo en incontrolados momentos de ira.

—Si es así como vas a hablar.. , está bien —replicó bruscamente, furioso. Era evidente que estaba perplejo.

Ella guardó silencio. Estaba decidida a averiguar qué iba a hacer en vista de que ella no pensaba hacer nada.

—Pero no estoy bromeando —prosiguió él— Nos moriremos de hambre.

—Muy bien —concedió ella—. Pues nos moriremos de hambre.

Lo miró disimuladamente; estaba casi segura de que verdaderamente había llegado hasta donde podía llegar. Su voz, que nunca convencía por sí sola, transmitía ahora una especie de convicción. Estaba sin un céntimo. En cuatro años había despilfarrado doce mil libras y no tenía nada que mostrar a cambio más que malas digestiones y la trágica figura de una esposa. Una pequeña satisfacción —y la Baines que había en ella se aferraba a ello y se esforzaba en extraer un contentamiento— era que su manera de vivir, pasando de un hotel a otro, hacía imposible que Gerald contrajese deudas. Algunas tal vez tuviera, desconocidas para Sofía, pero no podían ser muy cuantiosas.

Así que se miraron con odio y desesperación. Había llegado lo inevitable. Durante meses ella lo había afrontado con bravatas que no le ocultaban que al final sucedería. Durante años él había tenido la seguridad de que aunque lo inevitable pudiera ocurrirles a los demás, no podía ocurrirle a él. ¡Y allí estaba! Él notaba un gran peso en el estómago y ella un entumecimiento general que envolvía su fatiga. Ni siquiera entonces creía Gerald que el desastre fuese real. En cuanto a Sofía, estaba conciliando su amarga filosofía con las excentricidades del destino. ¿Quién iba a imaginar que ella, una joven educada, etcétera? Su madre no podría haberla sermoneado menos inflexiblemente que ella misma, detrás de aquella máscara desdeñosa.

—¡Bien; si es así ...! —explotó por fin Gerald, bufando. Y bufando salió de la habitación y en un segundo se marchó.

II

Lánguidamente cogió un libro en el momento en que Gerald se fue y trató de probarse a sí misma que tenía el suficiente dominio de sus nervios como para ponerse a leer. Durante mucho tiempo, la lectura había sido su único solaz. Pero no pudo leer. Recorrió con la vista la poco hospitalaria habitación y pensó en los cientos de habitaciones —unas espléndidas y otras viles, pero todas de un aspecto poco acogedor— por las que había pasado en su trayectoria de la loca excitación a la calmosa y fría repugnancia. El incesante estrépito de la calle irritaba sus hastiados oídos. Y la inundó como una gran ola un profundo deseo de paz. Y después se reavivó su honda desconfianza en Gerald; a pesar de su aire de grave desesperación, que tenía un toque de sinceridad totalmente nuevo en lo que ella lo conocía, no podía tener plena seguridad de que al declarar la extrema penuria no estuviese, después de todo, utilizando un truco para librarse de ella.

Se puso en pie de un salto, arrojó el libro sobre la cama y cogió sus guantes. Le seguiría si podía. Haría lo que nunca había hecho: espiarle. Luchando contra su lasitud bajó la larga y sinuosa escalera y atisbo la calle desde la puerta. La planta baja del hotel era una taberna; el robusto dueño estaba pasando un trapo ligeramente a una de las tres mesitas amarillas que había en la acera. Sonrió con su acostumbrada benevolencia y sin hablar palabra señaló en la dirección de la Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. Ella vislumbró a Gerald a lo lejos. Iba fumando un cigarro.

Parecía un hombrecillo sin preocupaciones. El humo del cigarro le daba primero la vuelta a la mejilla izquierda y luego a la derecha, elevándose hasta desaparecer. Caminaba con paso alegre, blandiendo el bastón con la libertad que le permitía el tránsito de la calle, echando ojeadas a los escaparates de todas las tiendas y a los ojos de todas las mujeres de menos de cuarenta. No era ni por asomo el mismo hombre que hacía un momento le estaba escupiendo airadas amenazas en la habitación del hotel. Era un tipo de un encanto risueño, preparado para gozar de todas las venturosas alegrías que el destino pudiera ofrecerle.

¿Y si se daba la vuelta y la veía?

Si se daba la vuelta y la veía y le preguntaba qué estaba haciendo en la calle, le diría lisa y llanamente: «Te estoy siguiendo para averiguar qué haces».

Pero no se volvió. Siguió directo hacia delante, torció en la iglesia, donde la multitud se hacía más espesa, tomando la Rue Montmartre y después cruzó el bulevar. Toda la ciudad parecía vivaz y excitada. Sonaban salvas en lenta sucesión y ondeaban banderas. Sofía no tenía idea de lo que significaba aquel cañoneo, pues aunque leía mucho jamás leía un periódico; ni se le había ocurrido abrirlo. Pero estaba acostumbrada a la atmósfera febril de París. Recientemente había visto regimientos de caballería exhibiéndose y haciendo cabriolas en los jardines del Luxemburgo y había admirado mucho la hermosa imagen. Aceptaba los cañonazos como otra expresión de la animación que de una u otra manera tenía que desahogarse en aquel imperio febril. Así pues, los aceptó y los olvidó, utilizando el panorama de la capital en su totalidad como vago telón de fondo de su exacerbado egoísmo.

Se veía obligada a andar despacio, pues Gerald así lo hacía. Una mujer hermosa, o cualquier mujer que no parezca una bruja o sea de edad venerable, que camine despacio por las calles de París, se torna al instante en motivo de deseos inconvenientes como representación del máximo objetivo sobre la tierra, superando siempre en importancia a la política y a los negocios. Lo mismo que un inglés patriótico nunca está demasiado ocupado para correr tras un zorro, un francés está siempre dispuesto a abandonarlo todo para seguir a una mujer que jamás ha visto. Muchos hombres se fijaban en ella, con el romántico misterio sajón de su temperamento y su atavío parisiense, pero todos se abstuvieron de abordarla, no precisamente por respeto a

su expresión melancólica sino por la convicción, que les daba la experiencia, de que aquellos ojos absortos estaban inamoviblemente fijos en otro. Avanzaba sin ser molestada entre lebreles que echaban espuma por la boca, como protegida por un hechizo.

Por el lado sur del bulevar, Gerald bajó la Rue Montmartre y luego torció repentinamente por la Rue Croissant. Sofía se detuvo y preguntó el precio de unos peines que estaban en el escaparate de una tiendecita. Después continuó, pasando atrevidamente el extremo de la Rue Croissant. ¡Ni sombra de Gerald! Recorrió toda la calle mirando los letreros de los periódicos, *Le Bien Public, La Presse Libre, La Patrie.* En la esquina había una lechería. Entró, pidió un chocolate y se sentó. Deseaba tomar café, pero todos los médicos se lo habían prohibido a causa de sus vahídos. Cuando ya había pedido el chocolate pensó que en aquella ocasión, en la que tenía necesidad de fuerzas para hacer frente a sus grandes fatigas, sólo le serviría el café y cambió la orden. Estaba cerca de la puerta y Gerald no podía escapar a su vigilancia si aparecía por aquel extremo de la calle. Se tomó el café con ávida satisfacción y esperó en la lechería hasta que empezó a tener la sensación de que todo el mundo la miraba. Entonces Gerald pasó ante la puerta, a dos metros de ella. Volvió la esquina y siguió bajando la Rue Montmartre. Sofía pagó el café y continuó la persecución. Se sentía más vigorosa. Apretaba los labios y pensaba «dondequiera que vaya iré yo; no me importa lo que ocurra». Lo despreciaba. Se sentía superior a él. Le parecía que de uno u otro modo, desde que salió del hotel, se había tornado cada vez más vil y debía ser exterminado. En cuanto a la Rue Croissant, imaginaba infamias. No había ningún motivo visible para esta intensificación de su actitud hacia él; era simplemente consecuencia de la persecución. Lo único de lo que se le podía acusar con toda seguridad era de fumarse un cigarro.

Gerald entró en una tabaquería y salió con un cigarro más largo que el primero, un artículo más caro; le quitó el anillo y lo encendió como si fuese un millonario. Aquél era el hombre que juraba que no poseía cinco francos.

Sofía lo siguió hasta la Rue de Rivoli y luego lo perdió. En dicha calle había una gran muchedumbre que aumentaba por momentos, muchas banderolas, soldados y policías gesticulantes. El efecto general de la calle era como si todas las cosas se mecieran suavemente con la brisa. Sofía se vio absorbida por la multitud como por un torrente; cuando trató de salir de ella metiéndose en una plaza una fila de policías sonrientes le impidió el paso; ella formaba parte del tránsito que tenían que regular. Continuó sin rumbo fijo hasta que el Louvre apareció ante sus ojos. ¡Al fin y al cabo, Gerald no había hecho sino salir a ver lo que pasaba! Ella no sabía lo que era. No tenía ninguna curiosidad. En medio de aquella masa de humanidad cada vez más densa, que de común acuerdo miraba de hito en hito el vasto monumento de las vanidades reales e imperiales, pensó con su típica adustez cómo había sacrificado su carrera de maestra por la oportunidad de ver a Gerald una vez al trimestre en la tienda. Se regodeó en ello como se regodea un apetito enfermo en un alimento contaminado. Y vio la tienda y la curva de la escalera que subía al entresuelo, y el espejo de cuerpo entero de esta estancia.

Entonces empezaron a retumbar de nuevo los cañones; varios espléndidos carruajes salieron uno tras otro por una majestuosa puerta y centellearon en dirección oeste por una avenida de espléndidos e impecables uniformes. Los carruajes iban cargados de uniformes todavía más espléndidos y atuendos deliciosos. Sofía, con su traje negro de modesta elegancia, observó mecánicamente que a las mujeres ataviadas les resultaba mucho más fácil ir sentadas en un coche ahora que habían desaparecido las crinolinas. Aquella fue la única impresión que obtuvo de aquella vislumbre de la postrera fiesta del imperio napoleónico. No sabía que se estaban mostrando ante ella los supremos pilares del imperialismo ni que los ojos de aquellos uniformes y atavíos estaban llenos de la legendaria belleza de Eugenia y sus oídos guardaban ecos de las largas frases de Napoleón III sobre su gratitud hacia el pueblo por la confianza que le había demostrado en el plebiscito, sobre la ratificación de las reformas constitucionales que garantizaban el orden y sobre el fortalecimiento del imperio en su base, y la demostración de la fuerza por medio de la moderación y contemplar el futuro sin temor, y sobre el seno de la paz y la libertad y la eterna perpetuación de su dinastía.

Ella sólo se preguntaba de manera vaga qué era lo que ocurría.

Cuando se hubo marchado el último carruaje y hubieron cesado las salvas y las aclamaciones, la muchedumbre empezó por fin a dispersarse. La arrastró a la plaza del Palais Royal, y en breves momentos consiguió apartarse y entrar en la Rue des Bons Enfants y quedó libre.

No le quedaban en el bolso más que tres cuartos y, por tanto, aunque estaba tan agotada que se sentía enferma, tenía que volver andando al hotel. Con gran lentitud marchó en dirección al bulevar a través del expirante jolgorio de la ciudad. Cerca de la Bolsa la adelantó un simón, y en su interior iban Gerald y una mujer. Él no la había visto; estaba hablando ansiosamente a su compañera, recargadamente vestida. Todo su cuerpo emanaba vivacidad. El simón desapareció de la vista en un momento, pero Sofía juzgó al instante la categoría de la mujer, que era evidentemente de la discreta clase que frecuentaba las grandes tiendas por las tardes con algo propio para vender.

La adustez de Sofía aumentó. El paso del simón, su fatigado cuerpo, la encantadora y despreocupada vivacidad de Gerald, el atractivo velo, que flotaba al viento, de la agradable y modesta cortesana, todo conspiró para aumentarla.

III

Gerald regresó aquella noche a la habitación que contenía a su mujer y todo lo demás que tenía en el mundo a eso de las nueve. Sofía estaba en la cama. Se había acostado empujada por el cansancio. Hubiera preferido esperar a su marido levantada, aunque hubiera supuesto no acostarse en toda la noche, pero su cuerpo pesaba demasiado para su espíritu. Estaba tendida en la oscuridad. No había comido nada. Gerald fue directamente a la habitación. Prendió una cerilla, que produjo, junto con un hedor, una llama azul durante unos segundos y después otra clara y amarilla. Encendió una vela y vio a su mujer.

—¡Oh! —exclamó—¡Estás ahí!

Ella no respondió.

—¿No quieres hablar, eh? —dijo él—. ¡Vaya una esposa agradable! Bueno, ¿te has decidido a hacer lo que te dije? He vuelto de propio para saberlo.

Ella siguió en silencio.

Gerald se sentó sin quitarse el sombrero y estiró las piernas, moviendo los pies de un lado a otro sobre los talones.

—No tengo absolutamente nada de dinero —prosiguió— Y estoy seguro de que tu familia se alegraría de prestamos un poco hasta que yo consiga algo. Sobre todo porque la cuestión es que tú te ibas a morir de hambre igual que yo. Si tuviera bastante para pagarte el viaje a Bursley te lo pagaría. Pero no tengo.

Ella no oía más que su exasperante voz. Entre los ojos de ambos estaba el extremo de la cama.

—¡Embustero! —dijo con inflexible claridad. La palabra le llegó con todo el veneno de su desprecio y su repugnancia.

Se produjo una pausa.

—¡Oh! ¿Soy un embustero, no? Gracias. Mentí bastante para conseguirte, lo admito. Pero nunca te quejaste de eso. Recuerdo aquel año nuevo que empecé con una mentira descomunal sólo para verte un momento, bruja mía. Pero entonces no te quejaste. Te recogí sólo con lo que llevabas puesto. Y me he gastado hasta el último céntimo contigo. Y ahora que he entrado en barrena me llamas mentiroso.

Ella no dijo nada.

—¡Sin embargo —continuó—, esto va a terminar, vaya que sí!

Se puso en pie, cambió la posición de la vela, colocándola sobre la cómoda, y luego acercó su baúl, que estaba junto a la pared, y se arrodilló delante de él.

Sofía dedujo que estaba haciendo su equipaje. Al principio no comprendió la referencia al año nuevo. Luego vio lo que quería decir. ¡Aquello que había contado a su madre, lo de que había sido atacado por unos rufianes al otro extremo de King Street, era un invento, un ardid para explicar de una manera plausible su presencia en la puerta de su madre! Y ella nunca había sospechado que la historia no fuera cierta. A pesar de la experiencia que tenía de sus embustes, nunca había sospechado que aquella afirmación concreta fuese una mentira. ¡Qué simplona era!

Hubo en la habitación un movimiento continuo durante un cuarto de hora. Después, una llave giró en la cerradura del baúl.

Su cabeza se asomó por encima de los pies de la cama.

—No va en broma, ¿sabes? —dijo.

Ella guardó silencio.

—Te daré otra oportunidad. ¿Escribirás a tu madre —o a Constanza si quieres —o no?

Ella desdeñó dar cualquier respuesta.

—Soy tu marido —dijo él—. Y es tu deber obedecerme, sobre todo en asuntos como éste. Te ordeno que escribas a tu madre.

Las comisuras de los labios de Sofía se torcieron hacia abajo.

Irritado por su muda obstinación, se apartó de la cama con un gesto repentino.

—Haz lo que quieras —exclamó, poniéndose la chaqueta— y yo haré lo que quiera. No puedes decir que no te he avisado. ¡Tú lo has querido, que conste! ¡De lo que te pase tú tendrás la culpa! —Se levantó y se encogió de hombros para que la chaqueta se pusiera en su sitio.

Sofía no pronunció una palabra, ni siquiera para decir que se encontraba mal.

Gerald empujó el baúl sacándolo de la habitación y volvió junto a la cama.

—Ya lo ves —dijo en tono amenazador—. Me voy.

Ella clavó la mirada en el sucio techo.

—¡Hum! —resopló él, acudiendo a su reserva de orgullo para luchar contra aquel persistente silencio, que estaba hiriendo su dignidad. Y se fue, proyectando la cabeza hacia delante como un púgil.

—¡Oye! —murmuró Sofía—. Te olvidas esto.

Él se volvió.

—¿Qué es eso?

—Es el papel del cigarro que compraste en la Rue Montmartre esta tarde —contestó en un tono significativo.

Él vaciló, después soltó una palabrota y de un brinco salió de la habitación. La había hecho sufrir, pero ella casi se lo había devuelto todo en aquel momento de cruel triunfo. Sofía se regocijaba por ello y jamás lo olvidaría.

Al cabo de cinco minutos, el lúgubre criado en zapatillas de fieltro y chaqueta de alpaca, que al parecer se pasaba la vida yendo y viniendo por las habitaciones como un conejo en una madriguera, llevó abajo el baúl de Gerald. Sofía reconoció el ruido peculiar de sus zapatillas.

Luego oyó llamar a la puerta. Entró la dueña, impulsada por una legítima curiosidad.

—¿Está *madame* enferma? —empezó.

Sofía rechazó sus ofrecimientos de comida y cuidados.

—*Madame* sabrá sin duda que *monsieur* se ha marchado...

—¿Ha pagado la cuenta? —interrogó Sofía sin rodeos.

—Sí, *madame,* pero hasta mañana. ¿Necesita algo *madame?*

—¿Quiere apagar la vela?

¡Así pues, la había abandonado!

«¡Y todo esto —reflexionó, escuchando en la oscuridad el incesante estrépito de la calle— porque mamá y Constanza querían ver al elefante y yo tuve que ir a la habitación de papá! ¡Ojalá nunca lo hubiera visto desde la ventana del entresuelo!

IV

Pasó una noche sumida en padecimiento físico, exacerbado por la incansable y ruidosa vitalidad de la calle. No dejaba de decirse: «Ahora estoy completamente sola, y me voy a poner enferma. Estoy enferma». Se imaginaba muriéndose en París y oía las expresiones de fácil simpatía y ociosa curiosidad inspiradas por la visión del cadáver de aquella extranjera en un pequeño hotel de París. En la excitación cada vez mayor de sus nervios, llegó a no poder evitar el concentrar su angustiada mente en una intensa y dolorosa expectación del siguiente ruido, que al producirse aumentaba su tortura y disminuía su fuerza para soportarla. Pasó por toda la interminable lentitud del amanecer, desde que apenas podía distinguir la ventana hasta leer la palabra *Bock* en el circulito rojo de papel que había estado toda la noche agitándose en el mar del cubrecama. Sabía que nunca volvería a dormir. No podía imaginarse durmiendo; entonces la sorprendió un sonido que pareció chocar con el resto de sus impresiones. Era que llamaban a la puerta. Sobresaltada, se dio cuenta de que debía de haberse quedado dormida.

—Adelante —musitó.

Entró el criado de la chaqueta de alpaca. Su rostro zorruno mostraba una taciturna conmiseración. Se aproximó a la cama sin hacer ruido —no parecía que poseyera ninguna característica humana sino, por el contrario, era un ser infinitamente misterioso y alejado de la humanidad —y tendió a Sofía una tarjeta de visita con su mano grisácea.

Era de Chirac.

—*Monsieur* preguntaba por *monsieur* —dijo el sirviente—. Y luego, como *monsieur* se ha ido, pidió ver a *madame.* Dice que es muy importante.

El corazón le dio un vuelco, en parte por una vaga alarma y en parte por una sensación de alivio ante la oportunidad de hablar con alguien a quien conociera. Trató de reflexionar racionalmente.

—¿Qué hora es? —inquirió.

—Las once, *madame.*

Aquello era sorprendente. El hecho de que fueran las once destruyó los restos de su confianza en sí misma. ¿Cómo podían ser las once, si apenas acababa de amanecer?

—Dice que es muy importante —repitió el criado, imperturbable y solemnemente—, ¿Quiere verlo *madame* un instante?

Entre la resignación y la impaciencia dijo Sofía:

—Sí.

—Está bien, *madame* —respondió el criado, desapareciendo sin un ruido.

Sofía se sentó y consiguió tirar de su salto de cama, que estaba en una silla, y echárselo sobre los hombros. Luego volvió a recostarse, dominada por la debilidad física y espiritual. Detestaba recibir a Chirac en una habitación, y más que nada en aquélla. Pero el hotel no tenía ninguna estancia pública excepto el comedor, que empezaba a ocuparse después de las once. Además, le resultaba imposible levantarse. Sí, en general le agradaba ver a Chirac. Era casi la única persona que conocía y sin duda el único ser en toda Europa al que podía llamar amigo en algún sentido de la palabra. Gerald y ella habían estado vagando de un lado para otro, rozando apenas la vida de las naciones y sin penetrar nunca en ella. No había ningún lugar para ellos porque no se lo habían hecho. Con la excepción de Chirac, a quien un accidente de los negocios había metido en la empresa de Gerald años antes, no tenían relaciones sociales. Gerald no era hombre dado a hacer amigos; ni siquiera parecía necesitarlos o, por lo menos, tener tal sensación. Pero como la casualidad le había dado a Chirac, había mantenido la relación con él siempre que venía a París. Desde luego Sofía había sido incapaz de escapar a la soledad impuesta por la vida en hoteles. Desde que se casó nunca había hablado con una mujer con alguna intimidad. Pero una o dos veces sí había estado cerca de la intimidad con Chirac, cuya nostálgica admiración hacia ella siempre había reactivado su deseo de cautivar.

Precedido por el criado, entró en la habitación apresuradamente y disculpándose, con aire de viva ansiedad. Y cuando vio que estaba acostada, sonrojada, con el cabello desarreglado y sólo la gracia de las cintas de seda de su salto de cama para aliviar la melancolía de un entorno repulsivo, su ansiedad pareció hacerse más viva.

—¡Querida *madame* —balbuceó—, le ruego me disculpe! —Se acercó precipitadamente a la cama y le besó la mano: un ligero picotazo, según su costumbre—. ¿Está enferma?

—Tengo jaqueca —dijo ella—, ¿Quería ver a Gerald?

—Sí —dijo en tono inseguro—. Me había prometido...

—Me ha dejado —le interrumpió Sofía con su débil y fatigada voz. Cerró los ojos mientras hablaba.

—¿Que la ha dejado? —Miró en tomo suyo para comprobar que el sirviente se había retirado.

—¡Me ha abandonado! ¡Anoche!

—¡No es posible! —musitó él.

Ella asintió con la cabeza. Se sentía muy cerca de él. Como todas las personas reservadas, podía ser repentinamente expansiva en ocasiones.

—¿Va en serio? —la interrogó.

—Todo va muy en serio —replicó ella.

—¡Y usted, enferma! ¡Ah, qué sinvergüenza! ¡Qué sinvergüenza! ¡Eso, por no decir más! —Gesticulaba con el sombrero en el aire.

—¿Qué era lo que quería usted, Chirac? —preguntó Sofía en tono confidencial.

—¡Eh, bien! —dijo él—. ¿No sabe dónde ha ido?

—No. ¿Qué quería usted? —insistió.

Estaba nervioso. Se movía inquieto. Sofía sospechó que aunque sentía sinceramente su apurada situación, estaba preocupado por intereses y aprensiones propias. No se negó a su solicitud de dejar de lado por el momento el tema de su sorprendente situación para referirse al motivo de su visita.

—¡Eh, bien! Ayer por la tarde vino a verme a la Rue du Croissant a pedirme dinero prestado.

Sofía comprendió entonces el objeto del paseo de Gerald la tarde anterior.

—Espero que no le dejara nada —dijo.

—¡Eh, bien! Esto fue lo que sucedió. Dijo que tenía que haber recibido cinco mil francos por la mañana pero que había venido un telegrama diciendo que no le llegarían hasta hoy. Y necesitaba de inmediato quinientos francos. Yo no tenía esa cantidad —sonrió tristemente como insinuando que no manejaba tales sumas—, pero la tomé de la caja del periódico. Es absolutamente necesario que la devuelva esta mañana —hablaba en tono cada vez más serio—. Su marido dijo que tomaría un coche y me traería el dinero en cuanto llegase el correo esta mañana, sobre las nueve. Perdóneme por perturbarla con semejante...

Se detuvo. Ella vio que le apenaba verdaderamente «perturbarla», pero que las circunstancias lo obligaban a ello.

—En mi periódico —murmuró Chirac—, no es tan fácil..., en fin...

Era verdad que a Gerald se le estaba acabando el dinero. No mentía cuando ella creyó que mentía. Su carácter se dejaba ver ahora tal cual era. En el momento de cesar final y definitivamente su legítimo suministro de dinero había empeñado su ingenio en buscar maneras ilegítimas de conseguirlo. ¡De hecho, simplemente se lo había robado a Chirac, con el añadido ornamental de poner en peligro la reputación y el empleo de éste, a modo de recompensa por su amabilidad! Y por si esto fuera poco, el dinero lo embriagó en cuanto estuvo en su poder, y él cedió a la primera tentación fatua que se presentó. No tenía sentido de la responsabilidad ni escrúpulos. Y por cuanto atañe a la prudencia corriente, ¿acaso no se había arriesgado a la deshonra permanente e incluso a la cárcel por una mísera cantidad que con toda seguridad malgastaría en dos

o tres días? Sí, era indudable que no se detendría ante nada, ante absolutamente nada.

—¿Usted no sabía que iba a ir a verme? —preguntó Chirac, tirándose de la corta y sedosa barba castaña.

—No —respondió Sofía.

—¡Pero dijo que usted le había dado recuerdos para mí! —Asintió una o dos veces con la cabeza, aceptando triste pero sinceramente, como buen latino, la realidad de la naturaleza humana, reconciliándose con ella al momento.

Sofía se rebeló ante aquel detalle supremo de la triquiñuela de Gerald.

—Es una suerte que yo pueda pagarle —dijo.

—Pero... —trató él de protestar.

—Tengo bastante dinero.

No lo dijo por encubrir a Gerald, sino solamente por amor propio. No dejaría que Chirac creyera que era la esposa de un hombre desprovisto de todo honor. Y así vistió a Gerald con el harapo de que por lo menos no la había dejado en la miseria además de enferma. Su afirmación resultaba extraña en vista del hecho de que la había abandonado la tarde anterior, es decir, inmediatamente después del préstamo de Chirac. Pero éste no la analizó.

—Quizá tenga la intención de enviarme el dinero. Quizá, después de todo, esté ahora en las oficinas...

—No —le interrumpió Sofía—. Se ha ido. ¿Quiere ir abajo y esperarme? Iremos juntos a Cook. El dinero que tengo es inglés.

—¿A Cook? —repitió él. El nombre ahora tan poderoso tenía entonces poco significado—. Pero está enferma. No puede...

—Me siento mejor.

Así era. O mejor dicho, no sentía otra cosa que el poder de su resolución para hacer desaparecer la ansiedad de aquella frente nostálgica. Lo vergonzoso de la mala pasada de la que Chirac había sido víctima despertó en ella nuevas fuerzas. Se vistió en medio de un padecimiento físico que sin embargo no tenía más realidad que una pesadilla. Buscó en un lugar en el que ni a un marido inquisitivo se le habría ocurrido buscar y después, bajó penosamente la larga escalera, agarrándose a la barandilla, que daba vueltas a su alrededor arrastrando consigo toda la escalera. «Al fin y al cabo —pensó—, no puedo estar muy grave porque no habría podido levantarme y salir. ¡Nunca me hubiera imaginado, esta mañana temprano, que fuera capaz de hacerlo! ¡No puedo estar tan mal como creía!».

Y en el vestíbulo se reunió con Chirac, cuyo rostro se iluminó ante su aparición, que probaba que realmente le iba a entregar el dinero.

—Permítame...

—Estoy bien —sonrió ella, tambaleándose—. Vaya a buscar un coche. —De pronto se dio cuenta de que podría haberle dado el dinero en billetes ingleses para que él los fuera a cambiar. Pero no se le había ocurrido. Su cerebro no era capaz de funcionar. Estaba dormida y despierta al mismo tiempo.

Chirac la ayudó a subir al coche.

V

En el *bureau de change* había un puñado de ingleses de rostros ingenuos, románticos y honrados muy distintos de las caras que se veían en la calle. No había corrupción en aquellos rostros, sino una especie de sinceridad asombrada e infantil, bastante fuera de su elemento y perdida en una tierra demasiado burda, y

que parecía pertenecer a una época anterior. A Sofía le agradó la mirada de los turistas y sus ropas corrientes y feas. Anheló estar de regreso en Inglaterra, lo anheló por un momento con violencia, ahogándose en aquel deseo.

El empleado inglés, detrás de sus barrotes de latón, cogió sus billetes y los examinó atentamente uno por uno. Ella lo observaba, no del todo convencida de que fuese real, y pensaba vagamente en la odiosa mañana en que había sustraído los billetes del bolsillo de Gerald. Se sentía llena de compasión por la sencilla e ignorante Sofía de aquellos días, la Sofía que aún se hacía algunas ilusiones acerca del carácter de Gerald. Muchas veces desde entonces había sentido la tentación de echar mano del dinero, pero siempre la había resistido, diciéndose que llegaría una hora de necesidad más apremiante. Había llegado. Estaba orgullosa de su firmeza, de la fuerza de voluntad que le había permitido reservar intacto aquel fondo. El empleado le echó una mirada penetrante y luego le preguntó cómo quería el dinero francés. Y ella vio los billetes caer uno tras otro conforme el empleado los separaba produciendo un ruido seco.

Chirac estaba junto a ella.

—¿Está bien la cuenta? —dijo ella, empujando hacia él cinco billetes de cien francos.

—No sabría cómo agradecérselo —dijo aceptando los billetes—. Verdaderamente...

Su alegría era inconfundiblemente ansiosa. Había sufrido una conmoción y un gran susto y ahora veía que el peligro había pasado. Podía volver al cajero de su periódico y tirarle el dinero con aire señorial y despreocupado, como diciendo «¡cuando se trata de esos ingleses, uno siempre puede estar seguro!». Pero antes la acompañaría al hotel. Ella no aceptó; no sabía por qué, pues era su único punto de apoyo moral en toda Francia. Él insistió. Ella cedió. Por tanto volvió la espalda con pesar a aquel pequeño oasis inglés en el Sahara de París y se dirigió vacilante al simón.

Y una vez hecho lo que había hecho perdió el dominio de su cuerpo y se reclinó, inerte y desmadejada. Chirac estaba visiblemente alarmado. No decía nada, pero la miraba de vez en cuando con ojos llenos de temor. Sofía tenía la sensación de que el coche nadaba en medio de las olas sobre grandes profundidades. Después sintió un gran peso contra su hombro; había caído, inconsciente, encima de Chirac.

Capítulo V

LA FIEBRE

I

Luego se halló acostada en un pequeño cuarto, oscuro a causa de unas gruesas cortinas; a través de los visillos de encaje se filtraba una tenue luz de una bella tonalidad plateada. Había un hombre en pie junto al lecho; no era Chirac.

—Bien, *madame* —le dijo con amable firmeza y pronunciando las vocales con una exagerada pureza que resultaba encantadora—. Tiene fiebre mucosa. Yo también la tuve. Tendrá que tomar baños con mucha frecuencia. Tengo que pedirle que se someta a ello, que sea buena.

No contestó. Ni se le ocurrió contestar. Pero sí pensó que aquel médico —probablemente era un médico— estaba exagerando su caso. Se sentía mejor que en los últimos dos días. Sin embargo no tenía ganas de moverse ni estaba preocupada en lo más mínimo en cuanto a dónde estaba. Se quedó callada.

Una mujer con un *deshabillé* bastante coqueto cuidaba de ella con habilidad de experta.

Más tarde, a Sofía le pareció que volvía a visitar el mar en cuyas olas había nadado el coche, pero esta vez se hallaba debajo del agua, en un golfo de espantosa profundidad; los sonidos del mundo le llegaban a través del agua, extraños y repentinos. Unas manos la agarraron y la sacaron de la gruta subacuática en la que estaba escondida para someterla a nuevas alarmas. Y percibió brevemente que había una gran bañera al lado de la cama y que la estaban introduciendo en ella. El agua estaba helada. Después de aquello su visión de las cosas fue durante un tiempo más clara y precisa. Por los retazos de conversación que oyó supo que la metían en el baño frío que estaba junto a su cama cada tres horas, de día y de noche, y que permanecía diez minutos en él. Siempre, antes del baño, tenía que beber un vaso de vino, y a veces otro mientras estaba en el baño. Aparte de esto y alguna que otra taza de sopa no tomaba nada, ni sentía deseos de hacerlo. Se acostumbró del todo a aquellos extraordinarios hábitos de vida, a esta fusión de la noche y el día en una monótona e interminable repetición del mismo rito en las mismas circunstancias y exactamente en el mismo lugar. Luego siguió un período durante el cual se oponía a que la despertaran a cada momento para la irritante inmersión. Y luchaba contra ella hasta en sueños. Le pareció que pasaban largos días en los que no estaba segura de si la habían metido en el baño o no, en los que todos los fenómenos externos estaban desconcertantemente entretejidos con cosas que ella sabía que eran meras fantasías. Y después se sintió abrumada por la desesperada gravedad de su estado. Creía que su estado era desesperado. Creía que se estaba muriendo. Se sentía en extremo desgraciada, no porque se estuviera muriendo sino porque los velos del sentido fueran tan desconcertantes y exasperantes y porque su extenuado cuerpo estuviera tan viciado por la enfermedad en cada una de sus fibras. Se daba perfecta cuenta de que iba a morir. Gritó pidiendo unas tijeras. Quería cortarse el pelo y enviar parte a Constanza y parte a su madre, en paquetes distintos. Insistió en los paquetes distintos. Nadie quería darle unas tijeras. Imploró con mansedumbre, con altivez, con furia, pero nadie quiso contentarla. Le parecía horrible que todo su cabello tuviera que ir con ella al ataúd mientras Constanza y su madre no tenían nada para recordarla, ninguna remembranza tangible de su belleza. Entonces luchó por las tijeras. Se agarró —siempre a través de aquellos engañosos velos— a alguien que la estaba metiendo en la bañera; luchó frenéticamente. Le pareció que aquella persona era la mujer corpulenta que había visto cenando en Sylvain con el inglés buscapleitos hacía cuatro años. No podía librarse de aquella singular idea, aunque sabía que era absurda...

Mucho después —le pareció un siglo— vio real e inconfundiblemente a la mujer sentada al lado de su cama; estaba llorando.

—¿Por qué llora? —le preguntó Sofía asombrada.

Y la otra mujer, más joven, que estaba junto a los pies de la cama, replicó:

—¡Hace usted bien en preguntarle! Es usted quien le ha hecho daño, en su delirio, cuando pedía las tijeras como una loca.

La mujer corpulenta sonrió con las lágrimas aún en las mejillas, pero Sofía lloró de remordimiento. La mujer corpulenta parecía vieja, gastada y desaliñada. La otra era mucho más joven. Sofía no se molestó en preguntarles quiénes eran.

Aquella pequeña conversación supuso un breve interludio en el delirio, que volvió a apoderarse de ella y a distorsionarlo todo. Olvidó, no obstante, que estaba destinada a morir.

Un día su mente se aclaró. Pudo estar segura de que se había dormido por la mañana y no se había despertado hasta avanzada la tarde. Por lo tanto no la habían metido en el baño.

—¿He tomado mis baños? —inquirió.

Era el médico quien estaba ante ella.

—No —dijo—; los baños se han terminado.

Supo por su expresión que estaba fuera de peligro. Además sentía una nueva sensación en su cuerpo, como si la fuente de la energía física que había en su interior, mucho tiempo interrumpida, hubiera vuelto a empezar a fluir, pero muy lentamente, un goteo. Era volver a nacer. No estaba alegre, pero su cuerpo sí lo estaba; su cuerpo tenía existencia propia.

Ahora la dejaban sola muchas veces en la habitación. A la derecha de los pies de la cama había un piano de nogal y a la izquierda una chimenea con un gran espejo. No dijo una palabra de ello a ninguna de las dos mujeres.

A menudo se sentaban en la cama y hablaban sin cesar. Sofía se enteró de que la mujer corpulenta se apellidaba Foucault y la otra Laurence. En ocasiones Laurence se dirigía a *madame* Foucault como Aimée, pero por lo general era más formal. *Madame* Foucault siempre llamaba Laurence a la otra.

Se despertó la curiosidad de Sofía. Pero no pudo obtener ninguna información muy precisa acerca de dónde se encontraba, salvo que la casa estaba en la Rue Bréda, a la altura de la Rue de Notre Dame de Lorette. Vagamente recordó que la calle tenía una fama siniestra. Resultó que el día que había salido con Chirac la parte alta de esta calle estaba cerrada por obras (se acordaba de esto) y el cochero había girado por la Rue Bréda para dar un rodeo, y que había perdido el conocimiento justo delante de la casa de *madame* Foucault. En aquel momento *madame* Foucault estaba subiendo a un coche, pero había dicho a Chirac que llevase a Sofía a la casa; un policía le ayudó. Luego, cuando llegó el médico, se descubrió que no se la podía trasladar, como no fuera a un hospital, y *madame* Foucault y Laurence estaban decididas a que ninguna amiga de Chirac fuese entregada a los horrores de un hospital parisiense. *Madame* Foucault había estado en uno como paciente y Laurence había sido enfermera en otro...

Chirac se había marchado. Las dos mujeres hablaban de manera poco precisa de una guerra.

—¡Qué amables han sido ustedes! —murmuró Sofía con los ojos húmedos.

Pero ellas la hicieron callar con sus gestos. No debía hablar. No tenían nada más que decirle, al parecer. Dijeron que Chirac volvería pronto quizá y que podría hablar con él. Era evidente que le profesaban afecto. A menudo decían que era un muchacho encantador.

Poco a poco Sofía comprendió la duración y la gravedad de su dolencia, la inmensa devoción de las dos mujeres, lo mucho que había perturbado sus vidas y su propia debilidad. Vio que las mujeres le tenían gran apego y no podía entender por qué, ya que nunca había hecho nada por ellas, mientras que ellas lo habían hecho todo por ella. No sabía que el bien que se hace, no el que se recibe, es la causa de ese apego.

Estaba constantemente conspirando y reuniendo sus fuerzas para desobedecer las órdenes y llegar hasta el espejo. Sus estudios preliminares y sus preparativos fueron tan complicados como los de un preso que se dispone a escapar de una fortaleza. El primer intento fue un fracaso. El segundo tuvo éxito. Aunque no podía mantenerse en pie sin un apoyo, agarrándose a la cama consiguió llegar a una silla y luego ir empujando ésta delante de sí hasta acercarse al espejo. La empresa fue excitante y tremenda. Después vio un rostro en el espejo: pálido, increíblemente demacrado, con grandes ojos de loca que miraban fijamente; los hombros se encorvaban como de vejez. Era una visión dolorosa, casi horrible. La asustó; alarmada, retrocedió. Al no prestar suficiente atención a la silla cayó al suelo. No pudo levantarse y en aquella ignominiosa situación la encontraron sus enfadadas carceleras. La visión de su rostro le había mostrado mejor que ninguna otra cosa la gravedad de su aventura. Cuando las mujeres levantaron su masa inerte y arrepentida y la llevaron al lecho, reflexionó: «¡Qué vida tan extraña la mía!». Le parecía que tendría que estar arreglando sombreros en el entresuelo en vez de hallarse en aquel misterioso interior parisiense con sus cortinas corridas.

II

Cierto día, *madame* Foucault llamó a la puerta de la pequeña habitación de Sofía (esta ceremonia de llamar a la puerta era una de las indicaciones de que a Sofía, convaleciente, se le habían devuelto sus derechos como persona) y gritó:

—*¡Madame,* vamos a dejarla sola un rato!

—Pase —dijo Sofía, que estaba sentada en un sillón, leyendo.

M*adame* Foucault abrió la puerta.

—Vamos a dejarla sola un rato —repitió en voz baja y confidencial, que contrastaba marcadamente con el grito que había dado detrás de la puerta.

Sofía hizo una inclinación de cabeza y sonrió; *madame* Foucault hizo lo mismo. Pero el rostro de *madame* Foucault recobró enseguida su expresión preocupada.

—El hermano de la sirvienta se casa hoy y ella nos ha rogado que le demos dos días: ¿qué podíamos hacer? *Madame* Laurence está fuera. Y yo tengo que salir. Son las cuatro. Volveré a las seis en punto. Así que...

—Perfectamente —asintió Sofía.

Miró con curiosidad a *madame* Foucault, que iba arreglada con esmero para salir; llevaba un vestido de shantung amarillo con adornos azules, guantes de color limón claro, un sombrerito azul y una pequeña sombrilla blanca que abierta no abarcaba más que sus hombros. Llevaba mejillas, labios y ojos cargados de rojo, polvos o negro. Y aquella cintura excesivamente generosa había sido constreñida con la mayor astucia en un cinturón que hacía bajar en vez de subir las masas inferiores del amplio contorno. El efecto general era digno del esfuerzo que sin duda había puesto en él. A *Madame* Foucault no la rejuvenecía su *toilette,* pero casi le valía el perdón por el crimen de tener más de cuarenta años, estar gorda y gastada y tener arrugas. Era una de esas derrotas que son un triunfo.

—Está usted muy elegante —dijo Sofía, expresando su admiración.

—¡Ah! —exclamó ella, encogiéndose de hombros con desilusión—, ¡Elegante! ¿Qué importa eso?

Pero se sentía complacida.

La puerta principal se cerró con un portazo. Sofía, por primera vez sola en el piso al que la habían llevado inconsciente y del que desde entonces no había salido, tuvo la perturbadora sensación de estar rodeada de habitaciones misteriosas y de cosas misteriosas. Intentó seguir leyendo, pero las frases no le decían nada. Se puso en pie —ya podía andar un poco— y miró por la ventana a través de los intersticios del dibujo de las cortinas de encaje. La ventana daba al patio, que se hallaba unos cinco metros por debajo. Una pared baja separaba el patio del de la casa vecina. Y las ventanas de las dos casas, que solamente se diferenciaban por el diferente matiz de su pintura amarilla, se elevaban hilera tras hilera a la altura de los pisos y continuaban más allá de donde a Sofía le alcanzaba la vista. Oprimió el rostro contra el cristal y recordó la Plaza de San Lucas de su niñez; igual que allí, ni siquiera apretando la cara contra el cristal en la ventana del entresuelo llegaba a ver la acera, aquí no llegaba a ver el tejado; el patio era como el fondo de un pozo. Las ventanas no tenían fin; pudo contar seis pisos y los alféizares del séptimo eran el límite de su visión. Todas las ventanas tenían gruesas cortinas, como la suya. Algunas de las más altas tenían persianas verdes. ¡Apenas se oía ningún ruido! Se cernían misterios fuera igual que dentro del piso de *madame* Foucault. Sofía vio una mano sin cuerpo que descorrió una cortina y desapareció. Observó un pájaro verde en una diminuta jaula, en un alféizar de la casa de al lado. Una mujer que le pareció la portera apareció en el patio, colocó una plantita bajo un rayo de sol que durante un par de horas iluminaba un rincón por la tarde y volvió a desaparecer. Luego oyó un piano, en alguna parte. Eso fue todo. La sensación de que había secretas y extrañas vidas detrás de aquellas ventanas, de que había humanidad palpitando íntimamente por todas partes en torno a ella, oprimía su espíritu de una manera, sin embargo, no del todo desagradable. El entorno suavizaba su modo de ver el espectáculo de la existencia, ya que la tristeza se tornaba voluptuoso placer. Y el entorno la hizo recogerse sobre sí misma, en una sensual contemplación del hecho fundamental de Sofía Scales, antes Sofía

Baines.

Se volvió para contemplar la habitación, con las marcas de la bañera en el suelo, junto a la cama, el piano cubierto con una sábana y que nunca se había abierto, y sus dos baúles, que ocupaban el rincón opuesto de la habitación. Le vino la idea de revisar a fondo aquellos baúles, que Chirac u otra persona debían de haber traído del hotel. ¡Encima de uno de ellos estaba su bolso, atado con una cinta vieja y visiblemente sellado! ¡Qué cómicos eran aquellos franceses cuando consideraban necesario ponerse serios! Vació los dos baúles, examinando con detenimiento todas sus cosas y pensando en las diversas ocasiones en las que las había comprado. Luego las volvió a colocar con todo cuidado, llena la cabeza de recuerdos nuevamente despertados.

Se incorporó suspirando. Un reloj dio la hora en otra habitación. Parecía invitarla a hacer descubrimientos. No había estado en ninguna otra habitación del piso. No sabía nada del resto del piso salvo por los ruidos, pues ninguna de las mujeres se lo había descrito ni se les había ocurrido que a Sofía le pudiera apetecer salir de su habitación aunque no pudiera salir de la casa.

Abrió la puerta y echó una mirada al oscuro pasillo, que ya conocía. Sabía que la cocina estaba contigua a su cuartito y que a continuación se hallaba la puerta principal. Al otro lado del pasillo había cuatro puertas dobles. Cruzó a la que estaba frente a la suya y sin hacer ruido dio la vuelta al tirador, pero la puerta estaba cerrada con llave; lo mismo ocurrió con la siguiente. La tercera cedió y Sofía se encontró en un espacioso dormitorio con tres ventanas a la calle. Vio que el segundo par de puertas, que no había conseguido abrir, correspondían a una habitación que también comunicaba con aquélla. En medio de los dos pares de puertas había una ancha cama. Delante de la ventana central había un gran tocador. A la izquierda de la cama, ocultando a medias las puertas cerradas con llave, había un gran biombo. Sobre la chimenea de mármol, reflejándose en un enorme espejo que llegaba hasta la ornamentada moldura, había un reloj de basalto con dorados y unos candelabros a juego. Al otro lado de la habitación había un diván de gran anchura y longitud. El suelo era de roble pulido, con una piel a cada lado de la cama. A los pies de ésta había un pequeño escritorio con un frasco de tinta de a penique. Unos cuantos grabados y aguafuertes coloreados —que representaban, por ejemplo, a Luis Felipe con su familia y a gente que moría en una balsa— rompían el tedio de las paredes. La primera impresión que causó en Sofía fue de sombrío esplendor. Todo tenía aspecto de estar ricamente adornado, revestido, rizado, tallado y retorcido con suntuosidad. Las colgaduras del lecho, de color carmesí oscuro, formaban majestuosos pliegues al caer desde unas voluminosas rosetas. La colcha estaba cubierta de encaje. Las cortinas de las ventanas se extendían más de lo necesario y colgaban de unos volantes plisados *y con* flecos. La profusión de bordados daba rigidez al sofá verde y a sus cojines de satén. La araña que colgaba del centro del techo, modelada con figuras de cupidos que sostenían festones, era una centelleante confusión de dorados y brillos; éstos titilaron cuando Sofía pisó determinada parte del suelo. Las sillas de asiento de rejilla estaban doradas de arriba abajo. Se tenía una sensación de amplitud. Y la colocación de la cama entre las dos puertas dobles, con las tres ventanas delante y otros pares de puertas que comunicaban con otras habitaciones a ambos lados, daba lugar además a una admirable simetría.

Pero Sofía, con la mirada perspicaz de una mujer educada en las tradiciones de una modestia tan orgullosa que desdeña la ostentación, rápidamente captó y condenó los detalles de la habitación que imitaban el lujo. No le pareció que hubiera nada «bueno». Y en la Plaza de San Lucas «bueno» significaba labor honrada, permanencia y nada de pretensiones. Todas las telas eran baratas, chillonas y gastadas; todos los muebles estaban agrietados, combados o rotos. En el reloj eran las doce menos cinco, cuando en realidad eran las cinco. Y además había polvo por todas partes, excepto en los lugares en que ni la limpieza más superficial podría haberlo dejado. En los plisados más oscuros de los cortinajes era espeso. Los labios de Sofía se curvaron; instintivamente se recogió el *peignoir*[49]. Le vino a la memoria una de las frases de su madre: «una mano de gato». Y luego otra: «Si quieres dejar suciedad, déjala donde la vea todo el mundo, no en los rincones».

Atisbó detrás del biombo y todo el horrible turrisburris de un *cabinet de toilette* saltó a su vista: un repulsivo revoltijo de aguas infectas, recipientes y paños sucios, cepillos, esponjas, polvos y pastas. Había ropas colgadas en desorden de toscos clavos; entre ellas reconoció una bata de *madame* Foucault y, detrás de cosas de fecha posterior, la deslumbrante capa escarlata con la que había visto por primera ver a *madame* Foucault. ¡Así que aquélla era la habitación de *madame* Foucault! ¡Aquélla era la enramada de la que salía aquella elegancia, la inmundicia de la que había brotado la madura flor!

De aquella habitación pasó directamente a otra cuyos postigos estaban cerrados, dejándola en la penumbra. Era asimismo un dormitorio, mucho más pequeño que el de en medio y con una sola ventana, pero amueblado con la misma dudosa opulencia. Estaba cubierto de polvo por doquier; en el polvo del suelo se dejaban ver unas pequeñas huellas. En la parte de atrás había una puertecita, empapelada a juego con la pared, y tras ella un *cabinet de toilette*[50] sin luz ni aire; ni en la habitación ni en él había signo alguno de que allí viviera alguien. Volvió a atravesar el dormitorio principal y encontró otro que se correspondía con el segundo, pero abierto a plena luz del día y en un estado de extremo desorden; la cama de dos almohadas

estaba sin hacer; de todos los muebles colgaban prendas y toallas; por el suelo había zapatos esparcidos, y de un trozo de cuerda tendido delante de las ventanas pendía una sola media blanca, mojada. Atrás había un *cabinet de toilette,* tan oscuro como el otro, una vil y hedionda mezcolanza de utensilios cuyas familiares formas se dibujaban, vagas y extraordinariamente siniestras, en las densas tinieblas. Sofía se apartó con la justificada repugnancia de alguien cuyos preparativos para someterse a las miradas del mundo son tan francos y sencillos como los de un niño. La suciedad escondida la horrorizó tanto como horrorizaba a su madre; en cuanto a las artimañas de la mesa de aseo, las despreció con tanta dureza como desprecia la debilidad moral una joven santa que nunca ha sido tentada. Pensó en la extraña y laxa vida cotidiana de aquellas dos mujeres, cuyas horas parecían deslizarse sin provecho ni resultado positivo alguno. No había visto nada, pero desde el comienzo de su convalecencia sus oídos oían y podía recomponer las pruebas. Nunca se oía nada en el piso, aparte de la cocina, hasta mediodía. Entonces empezaban unos vagos ruidos y olores. Y hacia la una iba *madame* Foucault, sin arreglar, a inquirir si la criada había atendido a las necesidades de la inválida. Después, los olores de la cocina se hacían más fuertes; sonaban timbres; escapaban fragmentos de conversación de las puertas abiertas; de vez en cuando se oía una voz de hombre o unos pasos pesados; luego, la fragancia del café; a veces el chasquido de un beso, el ruido de la puerta de la casa al cerrarse, un rumor de alguien cepillando algo o sacudiendo una alfombra, un gritito causado por algún insignificante contratiempo doméstico. Laurence, todavía en bata, acudía a holgazanear a la habitación de Sofía, sucia y andrajosa pero cortés con aquella ceremonia suya, curiosamente rígida, y se tomaba allí el café. Seguía vagando en *peignoir* hasta las tres y entonces decía quizá, como si hiciera un inmenso y desacostumbrado esfuerzo: «Tengo que estar vestida a las cinco. No tengo ni un momento». Muchas veces *madame* Foucault no se vestía; aquellos días se iba a la cama inmediatamente después de cenar con la observación de que no sabía lo que le pasaba pero estaba agotada. Y entonces la criada se retiraba a su séptimo piso y todo quedaba en silencio hasta que, de vez en cuando, se percibían tenues deslizamientos a medianoche o más tarde. En una o dos ocasiones, por las rendijas de su puerta, Sofía había visto una luz a las dos de la mañana, poco antes de amanecer.

¡Sin embargo, aquéllas eran las mujeres que le habían salvado la vida, que entre las dos la habían metido en un baño frío cada tres horas día y noche durante semanas! ¡Sin duda, era imposible después de aquello despreciarlas por haraganear y charlar ociosas en *peignoir,* era imposible despreciarlas por cosa alguna! Pero Sofía, consciente del fuerte y resuelto carácter que había heredado, las desdeñaba porque eran unas pobrecillas. Lo único por lo que las envidiaba eran sus modales formales con ella, que parecían más dignos y gentilmente distantes conforme su salud mejoraba. Todo era *«madame», «madame»,* con una entonación de creciente deferencia. Tal vez le estaban pidiendo disculpas por ser como eran.

Merodeó por todos los rincones del piso, pero no descubrió más dormitorios, nada más que un gran armario atestado de vestidos de *madame* Foucault. Luego volvió al dormitorio grande y gozó del bullicioso movimiento y el estrépito de la calle en cuesta, sintiendo vagos y prolongados anhelos de fuerza y libertad en lugares sanos y espaciosos. Decidió que por la mañana se vestiría «como es debido» y nunca volvería a ponerse un *peignoir;* éste y todo lo que representaba le repugnaban. Y mientras miraba la calle dejó de verla y vio la oficina de Cook y a Chirac ayudándola a subir al coche. ¿Dónde estaba él? ¿Por qué la había traído a aquella casa imposible? ¿Qué pretendía con aquella conducta?... Pero ¿podía haber actuado de otro modo? Había hecho lo único que podía hacer... ¡La casualidad!... ¡La casualidad! Y ¿por qué una casa imposible? ¿Acaso un lugar era más imposible que otro?... Todo aquello era por haberse escapado de casa con Gerald. Era llamativo que pensara tan raras veces en Gerald. Había desaparecido de su vida como había entrado en ella: de una manera absurda y disparatada. Se preguntó cuál sería la siguiente etapa de su vida. No podía preverlo en modo alguno. Tal vez Gerald estaba muriéndose de hambre, o en la cárcel... ¡Bah! Aquella exclamación expresó el tremendo desdén que le inspiraban Gerald y la Sofía que antaño lo había tenido por el parangón de los hombres. ¡Bah!

Un coche que se detuvo ante la puerta de la casa la sacó de su meditación. Bajaron de él *Madame* Foucault y un hombre mucho más joven que ella. Sofía huyó. Al fin y al cabo era totalmente imperdonable andar metiendo la nariz en las habitaciones de los demás. Se dejó caer en su cama y cogió un libro por si entraba *madame* Foucault.

III

Por la tarde, justo después de anochecer, Sofía oyó desde la cama fuertes y ásperas voces provenientes de la habitación de *madame* Foucault. Nada excepto la cena había ocurrido desde la llegada de *madame* Foucault y el hombre joven. Era evidente que los dos habían cenado informalmente, en la habitación, alguna

cosa preparada por *madame* Foucault, que había servido a Sofía su comida de inválida. Aún flotaban en el aire los olores de la cocina.

El ruido de la violenta discusión continuaba y aumentaba; luego Sofía oyó los sollozos de la mujer, interrumpidos por breves y airadas frases del hombre. Después se abrió bruscamente la puerta de la habitación.

—*J'en ai soupé!* —exclamó él en tono de enfadada indignación—. *Laisse moi, je te prie!*[51]—Y luego un ruido leve y amortiguado, como de lucha, unos pasos rápidos y un violento portazo en la entrada. Después de aquello hubo un perceptible silencio salvo por lo que se refiere a los regulares sollozos. Sofía se preguntaba cuándo cesaría aquel monótono sollozo.

—¿Qué ocurre? —preguntó desde la cama.

Los sollozos aumentaron de intensidad, como los de un niño que nota que despierta simpatía e instintivamente empieza a aprovecharse de ella. Sofía acabó por levantarse y ponerse el peignoir que casi había decidido no volver a ponerse jamás.

El ancho pasillo estaba iluminado por una pequeña lámpara que apestaba a aceite, con un globo carmesí. Aquella suave y transformadora irradiación parecía pintar todo el pasillo de un lujo voluptuoso; tanto, que era imposible creer que el olor procediera de la lámpara. Debajo de ésta se hallaba *madame* Foucault tendida en el suelo, una masa informe de encajes, ropa blanca con volantes y corsé; su cabello castaño claro estaba suelto y extendido por el suelo. A primera vista aquel ser abandonado a la aflicción componía una imagen romántica y conmovedora, y Sofía pensó por un momento que al fin había visto la vida en un plano que se correspondía con sus sueños novelescos. Y la asaltó un sentimiento en cierto modo afín al de una persona corriente que se ve ante un vizconde. De lejos había algo imponente y sensacional en aquella figura postrada y temblorosa. Los trágicos efectos del amor estaban allí al parecer manifiestos, en una especie de digna belleza. Pero cuando Sofía se inclinó sobre *madame* Foucault y tocó su fofo cuerpo aquella ilusión se desvaneció inmediatamente; en lugar de dramáticamente patética, la mujer era ridícula. Su cara, sobre todo estropeada por el llanto, no podía sufrir la dura prueba de una inspección; era horrible; no era un cuadro sino una paleta de pintor; semejaba también el dibujo coloreado de un artista que pinta en el suelo, después de un fuerte chaparrón. Ya sólo sus grandes párpados bajados habrían hecho ridícula cualquier cara, y había monstruosos detalles mucho peores que los párpados. Era asombrosamente gorda; las carnes parecían escapar por todas partes de un corsé apretado hasta el límite extremo. Y por encima de las botas —todavía llevaba puestas unas primorosas botas de tacón alto, atadas muy justas— se le salían de repente las pantorrillas.

Siendo una mujer entre los cuarenta y los cincuenta, el obeso sepulcro de una difunta belleza vulgar—, no tenía derecho a pasiones, lágrimas ni homenajes, ni siquiera a un medio de vida; no tenía derecho a exponerse pintorescamente bajo un fulgor carmesí con toda la panoplia de ligas adornadas con cintas y las seducciones del encaje. Era una necia; era una vergüenza. Debería saber que sólo la juventud y la delgadez tienen derecho a apelar a los sentimientos con un indecente abandono.

Aquellos fueron los pensamientos que se mezclaron con la simpatía de la hermosa y esbelta Sofía cuando se inclinó sobre *madame* Foucault. La dueña de la casa le daba pena, pero al mismo tiempo la despreciaba y su congoja la molestaba.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó en voz baja.

—¡Me ha plantado! —balbuceó *madame* Foucault—, Y es el último. ¡Ahora ya no tengo a nadie!

Se revolcó de la manera más grotesca, pataleando y estallando de nuevo en sollozos. Sofía se sentía profundamente avergonzada por ella.

—Venga a echarse. ¡Vamos! —dijo, con un toque de aspereza—. No debe estar aquí en el suelo, de esa manera.

La conducta de *madame* Foucault era en verdad demasiado vergonzosa. Sofía la ayudó a levantarse, más moral que físicamente, y después la convenció de que entrase en el gran dormitorio. *Madame* Foucault cayó sobre la cama, cuyo cobertor estaba retirado a los pies. Sofía tapó con él la parte inferior del convulsivo cuerpo.

—¡Ahora cálmese, por favor!

También aquel cuarto estaba iluminado en color carmesí por una lamparita que había en la mesilla; aunque la pantalla estaba agrietada, el efecto general era indudablemente romántico. Sólo las almohadas del

amplio lecho y un pequeño semicírculo del suelo estaban iluminados; todo lo demás estaba sumido en la sombra. La cabeza de *madame* Foucault estaba hundida entre las almohadas. En el escritorio, una bandeja que contenía platos y vasos sucios y una botella de vino resultaba engañosamente pintoresca.

A pesar de su sincera gratitud hacia *madame* Foucault por su asombrosa manera de cuidarla durante su enfermedad, a Sofía no le agradaba la dueña de la casa y aquella escena le inspiraba una fría cólera. Veía la probabilidad de que los problemas de otra persona se amontonasen encima de los suyos. En su fuero interno no se opuso activamente, pues pensaba que ya no podía ser más irremediablemente desdichada de lo que era, pero pasivamente le disgustaba aquella imposición. Su razón le decía que debía ser comprensiva con aquella mujer avejentada, fea, desagradable e indigna, pero su corazón se negaba a ello; su corazón no quería saber nada en absoluto de *madame* Foucault ni meterse en su vida privada lo más mínimo.

—Ya no me queda ni un solo amigo —balbuceó *madame* Foucault.

—Oh, sí, claro que le quedan —dijo Sofía con animación—. Tiene a *madame* Laurence.

—Laurence..., eso no es un amigo. Ya sabe lo que quiero decir.

—¡Yo, yo! ¡Yo soy su amiga! —exclamó Sofía, obedeciendo a su conciencia.

—Es usted muy amable —replicó *madame* Foucault desde las almohadas—, Pero ya sabe lo que quiero decir.

Lo cierto era que Sofía no sabía lo que quería decir. Los términos de su relación habían cambiado de improviso. Ya no había ninguna pretenciosa ceremonia sino la sinceridad que trae el desastre. La amplia estructura de simulación que se había ido levantando entre ellas se había derrumbado por completo.

—Jamás en mi vida he tratado mal a un hombre —gimoteó *madame* Foucault—, Siempre he sido una buena chica. No hay ningún hombre que pueda decir que no he sido una buena chica. Nunca fui una chica como las demás. Y todos lo han dicho. ¡Ah! Cuando le digo que en tiempos tuve un palacete en la Avenue de la Reine Hortense. Cuatro caballos... He vendido un caballo a *madame* Musard... Ya conoce usted a *madame* Musard... Pero una no puede hacer economías. ¡Imposible hacer economías! ¡Ah! En el cincuenta y seis yo gastaba cien mil francos al año. Eso no puede durar. Siempre me he dicho a mí misma «eso no puede durar». Siempre tuve la intención... Pero ¿qué iba a hacer? Me instalé aquí y tomé dinero a préstamo para pagar los muebles. No me quedó ni una joya. ¡Todos los hombres son unos vagos! Pude alquilar tres habitaciones por trescientos cincuenta francos al mes, y sirviendo comidas y todo eso pude vivir.

—Entonces —dijo Sofía señalando la habitación que ocupaba, al otro lado del pasillo—, ¿ésa es su habitación?

—Sí —respondió *madame* Foucault—, La puse a usted ahí porque en aquel momento todas estas estaban alquiladas. Ya no lo están. Sólo una, la de Laurence, y no siempre me paga. ¿Qué iba a hacer? Los inquilinos... actualmente no se encuentran... No tengo nada, y debo dinero. Y él me deja. ¡Elige este momento para dejarme! Y ¿por qué? Por nada. Por nada. No es por su dinero por lo que lo siento. ¡No, no! ¡Ya sabe, a su edad —tiene veinticinco años— y con una mujer como yo... uno no es generoso! No. Yo lo amaba. Es a mi edad cuando una sabe amar. ¡La belleza siempre desaparece, pero no el temperamento! ¡Ah, lo que es eso...! ¡No! Yo lo amaba. Lo amo.

Las facciones de Sofía se estremecieron con una súbita emoción, motivada por la repetición de aquellas últimas palabras, cuyo hechizo ningún uso que se haga de ellas puede destruir. Pero no dijo nada.

—¿Sabe usted en qué me voy a convertir? Ya no me queda ninguna otra cosa. Y sé de otras que ya lo son. En una fregona. ¡Sí, en una fregona! Antes o después. Bueno, así es la vida. ¿Qué voy a hacer? Hay que seguir viviendo. —Y luego, en un tono diferente—: Le pido perdón, *madame,* por hablar así. Debería estar avergonzada.

Y Sofía pensó que también debería estar avergonzada por escucharla. Pero no lo estaba. Todo le parecía muy natural e incluso corriente. Y además Sofía se sentía imbuida de un sentimiento de superioridad sobre la mujer tendida en la cama. Cuatro años antes, en el restaurante Sylvain, la ingenua e ignorante Sofía había contemplado temerosa a la resplandeciente cortesana, con su mirada altiva, sus gestos amplios y fáciles y su imperturbable desprecio por el hombre que pagaba. Y ahora Sofía tenía conciencia de saber todo lo que había que saber sobre la naturaleza humana. Poseía no sólo juventud, belleza y virtud sino también conocimiento, el suficiente conocimiento para reconciliarla con su propia desgracia. Tenía una inteligencia clara y vigorosa y una conciencia limpia. Podía mirar a la cara a cualquiera y juzgar a cada cual como una mujer de mundo. Por el contrario, a aquel obsceno despojo que yacía en el lecho no le quedaba nada en

absoluto. No solamente había perdido su deslumbrante belleza; se había vuelto repulsiva. Seguramente no había tenido nunca sentido común ni fuerza de carácter. Su altivez de los tiempos gloriosos era sencillamente fatua y se fundaba en la estupidez. Se había pasado los años ociosa, dando tumbos todo el día por habitaciones sin aire y apareciendo por la noche para impresionar a unos papanatas; siempre queriendo hacer cosas que nunca hacía, siempre sorprendida por lo tarde que era, siempre ocupada con las fruslerías más nimias. Y allí estaba, con más de cuarenta años, retorciéndose por los suelos porque un muchacho de veinticinco años (que *tenía* que ser un despreciable idiota) la había abandonado después de una escena de ridículos gritos y portazos. ¡Ella dependía de los caprichos de un bribonzuelo, el último asno que se había apartado de ella con aborrecimiento! Sofía pensó: «¡Santo Dios! Si yo estuviera en su lugar no serían así las cosas. Yo sería rica. Habría ahorrado como el mayor de los tacaños. No habría dependido de nadie a esa edad. ¡Si no hubiera sido una cortesana mejor que esa lamentable mujer me habría ahogado!».

Eso pensó, con la dura vanidad de su consciente capacidad y de su energía juvenil, medio olvidando sus propias locuras y medio disculpándolas por su inexperiencia.

Sofía deseaba recorrer el piso y destruir todas las pantallas de color carmesí que había en él. Deseaba obligar a *madame* Foucault a recuperar el respeto de sí misma y la sagacidad. La reprensión moral, aunque la tenía presente, no era sino muy débil. Sin duda percibía el inmenso abismo que hay entre la mujer honrada y la descocada, pero no de la manera que habría esperado percibirlo. «¡Qué estúpida has sido!», pensaba, no «¡Qué pecadora!». Con su precoz cinismo, que chocaba un tanto con el juvenil encanto septentrional de su rostro, se dijo que la situación en su conjunto y sus actitudes relativas habrían sido diferentes si *madame* Foucault hubiera tenido el juicio de amasar una fortuna, como (según Gerald) algunas de sus rivales habían logrado hacer.

Y no dejaba de pensar, en otra parte de su mente: «No debería estar aquí. No sirve de nada discutir. No debería estar aquí. Chirac hizo por mí lo único que podía hacer. Pero ahora tengo que irme».

Madame Foucault seguía recitando sus congojas, sobre todo financieras, con débil voz humedecida por las lágrimas; seguía también disculpándose por hablar de sí misma. Ya no sollozaba; tenía la mirada clavada en la pared, lejos de Sofía, que se hallaba indecisa junto al lecho, avergonzada de la debilidad e incapacidad de su compañera.

—No debe usted olvidar —dijo Sofía, irritada por lo irremediablemente sombrío que era el cuadro que pintaba *madame* Foucault— que por lo menos yo le debo una suma considerable y que sólo estoy esperando a que me diga a cuánto asciende. Ya se lo he preguntado dos veces, creo.

—¡Oh, usted todavía está enferma! —repuso *madame* Foucault.

—Estoy lo bastante bien como para pagar mis deudas —dijo Sofía.

—No quiero aceptar dinero de usted —dijo *madame* Foucault.

—Pero ¿por qué no?

—Tendrá que pagar al médico.

—Por favor, no diga eso —interrumpió Sofía—, Tengo dinero y puedo pagarlo todo, y lo pagaré todo.

Estaba irritada porque tenía la seguridad de que *madame* Foucault sólo estaba fingiendo delicadeza y que de todos modos aquella delicadeza era ridícula. Sofía lo había observado las dos veces que había mencionado el tema de las facturas. *Madame* Foucault no la trataría como a un inquilino corriente, ahora que su enfermedad había pasado. Quería, por decirlo así, terminar brillantemente lo que había empezado y vivir en el recuerdo de Sofía como una figura única de generosa filantropía. Era un sentimiento, un lujo que deseaba ofrecerse a sí misma: pensaba que había hecho el papel de la providencia con una respetable señora casada en apuros; hacía frecuentes alusiones a las desdichas y el desamparo de Sofía. Pero no podía permitirse ese lujo. Lo miraba como mira una mujer pobre unas telas costosas en el escaparate de una tienda. La verdad era que no necesitaba el lujo para nada. Sofía estaba exasperada por dos razones: por el absurdo deseo de *madame* Foucault y por una natural objeción a representar el papel de sujeto de una acción filantrópica. No quería admitir que la dedicación de *madame* Foucault como enfermera le diese derecho a la satisfacción de ser una filántropa cuando no hacía ninguna falta la filantropía.

—¿Cuánto tiempo llevo aquí? —inquirió Sofía.

—No lo sé —murmuró *madame* Foucault—, Ocho semanas, o acaso nueve.

—Pongamos nueve —dijo Sofía.

—Muy bien —accedió *madame* Foucault.

—Y bien, ¿cuánto debo pagarle por semana?

—No quiero nada... ¡No quiero nada! Usted es amiga de Chirac. Usted...

—¡Nada de eso! —la interrumpió Sofía, dando golpecitos con el pie y mordiéndose los labios—. Claro que debo pagarle.

Madame Foucault lloraba en silencio.

—¿Le doy setenta y cinco francos por semana? —preguntó Sofía, deseosa de concluir con el asunto.

—¡Es demasiado! —protestó *madame* Foucault con poca sinceridad.

—¿Cómo? ¿Después de todo lo que ha hecho por mí?

—Yo no hablo de eso —replicó modestamente *madame* Foucault.

Si no era preciso pagar por la dedicación, setenta y cinco francos a la semana era indudablemente demasiado, ya que la mitad del tiempo Sofía no había comido casi nada. *Madame* Foucault, por tanto, no faltaba a la verdad cuando de nuevo protestó al ver los billetes que Sofía sacó de su baúl:

—¡Estoy segura de que es demasiado!

—¡Nada de eso! —repitió Sofía—. Nueve semanas a setenta y cinco francos. Eso hace seiscientos setenta y cinco. Aquí tiene setecientos.

—No tengo cambio —dijo *madame* Foucault— No tengo nada.

—Pues por el alquiler de la bañera —concluyó Sofía.

Dejó los billetes en la almohada. *Madame* Foucault los miró con glotonería, como hubiera hecho cualquiera en su lugar. No los tocó. Al cabo de un instante estalló en un llanto incontenible.

—Pero ¿por qué llora? —preguntó Sofía, ablandada.

—¡No..., no sé! —balbuceó *madame* Foucault—. Es usted muy hermosa. Estoy muy contenta de que la hayamos salvado. —Sus grandes ojos húmedos se posaron en Sofía.

Aquello era sentimentalismo. Sofía lo catalogó despiadadamente como sentimentalismo. Pero se conmovió. De pronto se conmovió. Aquellas mujeres, siendo estúpidas como eran, quizá le habían salvado la vida, ¡y era una extraña! A pesar de su indolencia, habían sido capaces de mostrar una resuelta perseverancia. Se podía decir que la casualidad las había lanzado a una empresa que no podrían haber abandonado hasta que ellas o la muerte hubiesen ganado la partida. Se podía decir que abrigaban una vaga esperanza de obtener un beneficio de sus esfuerzos. Pero aun así... Juzgando con arreglo a cualquier criterio habitual, habían sido unos ángeles de misericordia. ¡Y Sofía las despreciaba, haciendo pedazos sus motivos con crueldad, acusándolas de incapacidad cuando ella misma era una prueba suprema de su capacidad por lo menos en un sentido!

Se inclinó sobre el lecho.

—Nunca podré olvidar lo amables que han sido conmigo. ¡Es increíble! ¡Increíble! —Hablaba en voz baja, en un tono que revelaba un sentimiento sincero. Fue todo lo que dijo. No era capaz de adornar el tema. No tenía talento para expresar la gratitud.

Madame Foucault hizo un amago de gesto, como si quisiera dar un beso a Sofía con sus gruesos y ajados labios, pero se contuvo. Volvió a dejar caer la cabeza y sufrió un nuevo acceso de llanto nervioso. Inmediatamente después se oyó abrir un pestillo en la puerta del piso; la del dormitorio estaba abierta. Todavía sollozando con gran violencia, aguzó el oído y escondió los billetes debajo de la almohada.

Madame Laurence, como la llamaban —Sofía nunca había oído su apellido—, entró directamente en la habitación y contempló la escena, asombrada, con sus ojos oscuros y chispeantes. Por lo general iba vestida de negro porque el negro nunca se pasaba de moda; era una expresión de su carácter. Mostraba cierta elegancia; en comparación con el extremado desorden de *madame* Foucault y con el *deshabillé* de Sofía, su aspecto, recién

salida de un restaurante de moda, era brillante; le daba ventaja sobre las otras dos, esa ventaja moral que siempre da un atavío ceremonial.

—¿Qué es lo que pasa? —interrogó.

—¡Me ha plantado, Laurence! —exclamó *madame* Foucault en una especie de grito histérico que pareció abrirse paso por entre sus sollozos. Por la extraordinaria renovación de la congoja de *madame* Foucault se hubiera podido imaginar que el joven acababa de marcharse en aquel mismo instante.

Laurence y Sofía cambiaron una rápida mirada; Laurence, naturalmente, percibió que las relaciones de Sofía con la dueña de la casa eran de un género diferente, más franco. Indicó que lo había captado con un ligero movimiento de las cejas.

—¡Pero, escucha, Aimée! —dijo en tono de autoridad— No debes ponerte así. Él volverá.

—Jamás! —clamó *madame* Foucault— Se ha terminado. ¡Y es el último!

Laurence, sin hacer caso a *madame* Foucault, se acercó a Sofía.

—Parece usted muy cansada —dijo, acariciando el hombro de Sofía con su mano enguantada—. Está muy pálida. Todo esto no es para usted. ¡No es razonable que se quede aquí; aún está enferma! ¡A estas horas! ¡Verdaderamente no es razonable!

Empujó a Sofía hacia el pasillo. Y lo cierto es que ésta se dio cuenta entonces de lo agotada que estaba. Salió de la habitación con la pronta obediencia de la debilidad física y cerró su puerta.

Al cabo de una media hora, durante la cual estuvo oyendo confusos ruidos y murmullos, la puerta de su habitación se abrió a medias.

—¿Puedo entrar, ya que no está durmiendo? —Era la voz de Laurence. Era la segunda vez que se dirigía a ella sin añadir el formal *«madame»*.

—Pase, por favor —contestó Sofía desde la cama—. Estoy leyendo.

Laurence entró. Sofía se alegraba de verla y al mismo tiempo lo lamentaba. Anhelaba oír cotilleos que sin embargo pensaba que debía despreciar. Además sabía que si hablaban aquella noche lo harían como amigas y que Laurence la trataría ya siempre con la familiaridad de una amiga. Esto la horrorizaba. Con todo, sabía que en cualquier caso cedería a la tentación de escuchar los chismes.

—La he hecho meterse en la cama —dijo Laurence en un susurro, cerrando la puerta con cautela— ¡Pobre mujer! ¡Oh, qué pulsera más linda! Es una perla auténtica, ya se ve.

Su mirada errabunda había tropezado inmediatamente, con un infalible instinto, con una pulsera que Sofía había dejado accidentalmente sobre el piano al hacer inventario de sus posesiones. La cogió y luego la volvió a dejar donde estaba.

—Sí —dijo Sofía. Estuvo a punto de añadir: «Es casi la única joya que me queda», pero se detuvo.

Laurence se aproximó a la cama de Sofía y se inclinó sobre ella como hacía en su calidad de enfermera. Se había quitado los guantes y ofrecía una imagen bonita e incitante, con sus treinta años y su cara agradable y un poco picara, en la que se mezclaban la sapiencia de un pilluelo de la calle y la seguridad de una mujer que ha dejado de sorprenderse por la influencia de su nariz respingona en un hombre de gran inteligencia.

—¿Le dijo por qué se habían peleado hoy? —inquirió bruscamente Laurence. Y no sólo la manera de formular la pregunta sino el tono de seguridad en que la expresó mostraron que Laurence pretendía tratar a Sofía con familiaridad.

—¡Ni una palabra! —respondió Sofía.

En la brevedad de la pregunta y de la respuesta se daba por sentado, crudamente, todo lo que antes se hacía como si no existiera. Las relaciones entre las dos mujeres se habían modificado de manera definitiva en un momento.

—¡Sin duda ha sido culpa de ella! —dijo Laurence— Con los hombres es insoportable. Nunca he comprendido cómo esa pobre mujer ha podido salir adelante. Con las mujeres es encantadora. Pero parece que no puede evitar tratar a los hombres como a perros. A algunos les encanta, pero son pocos. ¿No es cierto?

Sofía sonrió.

—¡Se lo dije! ¡Cuántas veces se lo dije! Pero es inútil. Es más fuerte que ella; si acaba en la miseria se podrá decir que fue por eso. ¡La verdad es que no debía haberle invitado a venir aquí! ¡La verdad es que fue demasiado! ¡Si él supiera...!

—¿Por qué no? —preguntó Sofía torpemente. La respuesta la sobresaltó.

—Porque su habitación no ha sido desinfectada.

—Pero yo creía que todo el piso había sido desinfectado.

—Todo menos su habitación.

—Pero ¿por qué su habitación no?

Laurence se encogió de hombros.

—¡No querría revolver sus cosas! ¿Lo voy a saber yo? Ella es así. ¡Se le mete una idea en la cabeza y se acabó!

—Me dijo que todas las habitaciones habían sido desinfectadas.

—Eso dijo a la policía y al médico.

—Entonces ¿toda la desinfección no sirve de nada?

—¡En absoluto! Pero ella es así. Este piso podía dar buenos beneficios, pero con ella, nunca. ¡Ni siquiera ha pagado los muebles... después de dos años!

—Pero ¿qué va a ser de ella? —inquirió Sofía.

—¡Ah, eso! —Volvió a encogerse de hombros—. Lo único que sé es que yo tendré que marcharme. La última vez que traje aquí a *monsieur* Cerf fue demasiado grosera con él. Sin duda le habrá hablado de *monsieur* Cerf...

—No. ¿Quién es *monsieur* Cerf?

—¡Ah! ¿No se lo ha dicho? Me sorprende. *Monsieur* Cerf es mi amigo, ya sabe.

—¡Oh! —murmuró Sofía.

—Sí —prosiguió Laurence, impulsada por un deseo de impresionar a Sofía y de cotillear largo y tendido—. Es mi amigo. Lo conocí en el hospital. Fue por complacerlo por lo que dejé el hospital. Después estuvimos dos años peleados, pero al final cedió. Yo, ni un ápice. ¡Dos años! Es mucho tiempo. Y había dejado el hospital. Podía haber vuelto. Pero no quise. ¡No es vida, estar de enfermera en un hospital de París! No; me las arreglé lo mejor que pude... ¡Es el muchacho más encantador que se pueda imaginar! Y ahora es rico; es decir, relativamente. Tiene un primo infinitamente más rico que él. Esta noche cené con los dos en la Maison Dorée. Porque nada en la abundancia; me refiero al primo. Parece que ha hecho fortuna en Canadá.

—¿Sí? —dijo Sofía cortésmente. La mano de Laurence jugaba con el borde de la cama y Sofía reparó por primera vez en que llevaba una alianza.

—¿Le llama la atención mi anillo? —rió Laurence—. Ha sido él..., el primo. «¿Cómo?, me dijo, ¿no lleva usted alianza? Es más correcto llevar alianza. Después de cenar iremos a arreglarlo». Yo dije que todas las joyerías estarían cerradas. «Me da lo mismo, dijo. Abriremos una». Y efectivamente... así fue. ¡Lo consiguió! ¿No es bonito? —alargó la mano.

—Sí —dijo Sofía—, Es muy bonito.

—El suyo también lo es —añadió Laurence, con una entonación extremadamente intrigante.

—No es más que la alianza inglesa corriente —repuso Sofía, sonrojándose a su pesar.

—«Ahora los he casado. Soy yo, el *curé*[52]*»,* me dijo él, el primo, cuando me puso el anillo en el dedo. ¡Oh, es muy gracioso! Me agrada mucho. Y está completamente solo. Me preguntó si entre mis amigas había alguna muchacha guapa y simpática para que seamos cuatro cuando vayamos de picnic. Dije que no estaba

segura, pero que pensaba que no. ¿A quién conozco yo? A nadie. No soy una mujer como las demás. Siempre soy discreta. No me gustan las relaciones superficiales... Pero está muy bien, el primo. Ojos castaños..., es una idea. ¿Vendrá usted un día? Habla inglés. Le encanta el inglés. Es de lo más correcto; un perfecto caballero. Organizaría una fiesta espléndida. Estoy segura de que estaría encantado de conocerla. ¡Encantado!... En cuanto a mi Charles, por suerte está totalmente loco por mí; de otro modo tendría miedo.

Sonrió, y en su sonrisa había un franco respeto por el rostro de Sofía.

—Me temo que no podré ir —dijo Sofía. Se esforzó sinceramente por no dejar traslucir en sus palabras un tono de superioridad moral, pero no lo logró del todo. La sugerencia de Laurence no le causaba el menor horror. Sólo quería rechazarla, pero no pudo hacerlo con una voz natural.

—Es verdad que aún no está lo bastante fuerte —dijo la imperturbable Laurence, rápidamente y con una perfecta simulación de naturalidad—. Pero tiene que salir ya pronto a dar un pequeño paseo —Miró su anillo— Al fin y al cabo, es más correcto —observó juiciosamente—. Con una alianza es menos probable que la irriten a una. Lo que es curioso es que nunca se me haya ocurrido. Sin embargo...

—¿Le gustan las joyas? —inquirió Sofía.

—¿Que si me gustan las joyas? —con un gesto de las manos.

—¿Quiere alcanzarme aquella pulsera?

Laurence obedeció y Sofía se la puso a la joven en la muñeca.

—Quédesela —dijo Sofía.

—¿Para mí? —exclamó Laurence, embelesada—. Es demasiado.

—No es bastante —contestó Sofía—. Y cuando la mire, recuerde lo amable que ha sido conmigo y lo agradecida que le estoy.

—¡Qué bonito es lo que me ha dicho! —exclamó Laurence extáticamente.

Y Sofía pensó que, en efecto, había dicho algo muy bonito. Aquel regalo de la pulsera, recuerdo de una de las pocas locuras caprichosas que Gerald había cometido por ella y no por sí mismo, complacía mucho a Sofía.

—Me temo que el cuidar de mí la hizo descuidar a *monsieur* Cerf —añadió.

—¡Sí, un poco! —dijo Laurence en tono imparcial, con un leve mohín de altivez—. Es cierto que se quejaba. Pero yo enseguida le dejé las cosas claras. ¡Vaya idea! Él sabe que hay cosas con las que no bromeo. ¡No me la armará por segunda vez, créame!

Fue lo absolutamente convencida que estaba Laurence de su poder lo que impresionó a Sofía. A ésta le parecía un artículo vulgar, con un dudoso encanto, una mirada excesivamente descarada y una manera vulgar de moverse. Y se preguntaba cómo había fundado su imperio y en qué se basaba.

—No se la enseñaré a Aimée —susurró Laurence señalando la pulsera.

—Como quiera —asintió Sofía.

—Por cierto, ¿le he dicho que han declarado la guerra? —observó Laurence sin darle importancia.

—No —replicó Sofía—, ¿Qué guerra?

—La escena con Aimée hizo que lo olvidara... Con Alemania. La ciudad está muy excitada. Hay una enorme multitud delante de la Ópera. Dicen que estarán en Berlín dentro de un mes, o como mucho en dos meses.

—¡Oh! —murmuró Sofía—. ¿Por qué hay guerra?

—¡Ah! Eso me pregunto yo. Nadie lo sabe. Son esos prusianos.

—¿No cree usted que deberíamos empezar otra vez con la desinfección? —preguntó Sofía con preocupación—. Tengo que hablar con *madame* Foucault.

Laurence le dijo que no se preocupara y se fue a enseñarle la pulsera a *madame* Foucault. Había decidido privadamente que era un placer al que al fin y al cabo no podía renunciar.

IV

Cosa de dos semanas después —era un espléndido sábado de comienzos de agosto— Sofía, con un gran delantal sobre el vestido, estaba concluyendo los portentosos preparativos de la desinfección del piso. Parte de la tarea había sido ya ejecutada; su habitación y el pasillo habían sido fumigados el día anterior a pesar de la oposición de *madame* Foucault, que se había tomado a mal que Laurence le fuera con historias a Sofía. Laurence se había ido de la casa; en qué circunstancias exactamente Sofía no lo sabía, pero sospechaba que debió de ser como consecuencia de una escena que hubiera complicado el altercado causado por el resentimiento de *madame* Foucault contra Laurence. La breve y ficticia amistad entre Laurence y Sofía se había desvanecido como un sueño. La criada había sido despedida; en su lugar *madame* Foucault empleó a una asistenta que iba dos horas cada mañana. Finalmente, aquella mañana *madame* Foucault había recibido una carta en la que se la reclamaba junto a su padre enfermo, en St. Mammés-sur-Seine. Sofía estaba encantada de tener aquella oportunidad. La desinfección del piso había llegado a ser una obsesión para ella, la obsesión de una convaleciente cuya visión retuerce sin darse cuenta las cosas de la manera peor. El día antes había tenido problemas con *madame* Foucault y anticipaba otros más graves cuando llegara el momento de expulsar a aquélla de su propia habitación con todas sus pertenencias muebles. No obstante, Sofía estaba decidida, sucediera lo que sucediera, a llevar a cabo una cumplida fumigación de todo el piso. De ahí el entusiasmo con que, al apremiar a *madame* Foucault a ir a ver a su padre, había insistido en que estaba totalmente recuperada y podía apañarse sola un par de días. Debido a la parcial supresión de los servicios habituales de ferrocarril en aras de las necesidades militares, *madame* Foucault no podía ir y volver en el día. Sofía le había prestado un luis.

En cada una de las tres habitaciones delanteras ardían misteriosamente ollas de sulfuro; dos pares de puertas estaban selladas con papel para impedir que escapara el humo. La asistenta se había marchado. Sofía, con cepillo, tijeras, engrudo y hojas de periódico, estaba sellando el tercer par de puertas cuando se oyó llamar a la puerta del piso.

Para abrir no tuvo más que cruzar el pasillo.

Era Chirac. A ella no le sorprendió verlo. El comienzo de la guerra había inducido incluso a Sofía y a la dueña de la casa a ver por lo menos un periódico al día; de este modo había sabido, al ver un artículo firmado por él, que estaba de regreso en París después de una misión en los Vosgos para su periódico.

Él dio un respingo al verla.

—¡Ah! —Exhaló con lentitud aquella exclamación. Luego sonrió, tomó su mano y la besó.

El ver lo mucho que evidentemente le complacía volverla a ver fue la experiencia más grata que había tenido Sofía durante años.

—¿Así que está curada?

—Del todo.

Él suspiró.

—Ya sabe, es para mí un enorme alivio saber de verdad que ya no está en peligro. ¡Buen susto me dio..., un buen susto, querida *madame!*

Ella sonrió en silencio.

Cuando Chirac lanzó una mirada inquisitiva arriba y abajo por el pasillo, explicó:

—Estoy sola. Estoy desinfectando el piso.

—Entonces ¿es a sulfuro a lo que huele?

Ella asintió con la cabeza.

—Discúlpeme mientras acabo con esta puerta —dijo.

Él cerró la puerta del piso.

—¡Pero parece como si estuviera en su casa! —observó.

—Así tiene que ser —respondió ella.

Chirac volvió a mirar inquisitivamente arriba y abajo por el pasillo.

—¿Y es cierto que está sola ahora? —preguntó, como para asegurarse doblemente.

Sofía le explicó las circunstancias.

—Le debo mis más sinceras excusas por haberla traído aquí —le dijo en tono confidencial.

—Pero ¿por qué? —replicó ella—. Ha sido de lo más amable conmigo. Nadie podría haberlo sido más. Y al ser *madame* Laurence tan buena enfermera...

—Es verdad —dijo él— Ésa fue una razón. Lo cierto es que son unas mujercitas de muy buen natural... Ya comprenderá que como periodista me sucede conocer a toda clase de gente... —Hizo chascar los dedos—. Y como estábamos enfrente de la casa... En fin, le ruego me disculpe.

—Sujéteme este papel —le pidió Sofía—, Hay que tapar todas las ranuras, y también entre la puerta y el suelo.

—Habla usted un inglés maravilloso —murmuró él cogiendo el papel—. ¡No me la imagino a usted haciendo esto! Después —añadió, volviendo al tono confidencial— supongo que dejará a la Foucault, ¿hum?

—Supongo que sí —respondió ella en tono despreocupado.

—¿Se irá a Inglaterra?

Sofía se volvió hacia él mientras alisaba una tira de papel dándole golpecitos con el trapo del polvo y negó con la cabeza.

—¿A Inglaterra no?

—No.

—Si no es indiscreción, ¿dónde piensa marcharse?

—No sé —respondió con sinceridad.

Y no lo sabía. No tenía ningún plan. Su razón le decía que tenía que regresar a Bursley, o al menos escribir. Pero su orgullo no quería ni oír hablar de semejante rendición. Su situación tenía que ser mucho más desesperada de lo que era para que fuera capaz de confesar su derrota a su familia, incluso por carta. ¡Mil veces no! Eso era algo que estaba decidido para siempre. Se enfrentaría con cualquier desastre, con cualquier otra vergüenza, antes que con la vergüenza de la acogida indulgente de su familia.

—¿Y usted? —preguntó a Chirac—, ¿Cómo le van las cosas con la guerra?

Él le dijo en pocas palabras algunos hechos esenciales acerca de sí mismo.

—No se debe decir —añadió, refiriéndose a la guerra—, pero esto va a ir mal. Yo..., yo lo sé; ya me entiende.

—¿De veras? —respondió ella con indiferencia.

—¿No ha sabido nada de él? —inquirió Chirac.

—¿De quién? ¿De Gerald?

Él hizo un gesto.

—¡Nada! ¡Ni una palabra! ¡Nada!

—¡Habrá vuelto a Inglaterra?

—¡Nada de eso! —dijo ella categóricamente.

—Pero ¿por qué no?

—Porque prefiere Francia. Le gusta mucho Francia. Creo que es la única pasión verdadera que ha tenido en su vida.

—¡Es asombroso —reflexionó Chirac— cómo ama todo el mundo a Francia! ¡Y sin embargo...! Pero ¿qué hará para vivir? ¡Tiene que vivir!

Sofía se limitó a encogerse de hombros.

—Entonces ¿todo ha terminado entre ustedes? —murmuró él con cierto embarazo.

Ella hizo un gesto afirmativo. Estaba de rodillas, junto a la ranura entre las puertas y el suelo.

—¡Listo! Esta bien, ¿verdad? Ya he terminado.

Le sonrió, de frente a él en la oscuridad del descuidado y deteriorado pasillo. Los dos tuvieron una sensación de gran intimidad. Él se sintió profundamente halagado por la actitud de Sofía, y ella lo sabía.

—Ahora —dijo ella— voy a quitarme el delantal. ¿Dónde puedo llevarlo a usted? Sólo queda mi habitación y la necesito. ¿Qué hacemos?

—Escuche —sugirió inseguro Chirac—. ¿Quiere hacerme el honor de acompañarme a dar un paseo en coche? Le hará bien. Hace sol. Y está usted siempre muy pálida.

—Será un placer —accedió ella cordialmente.

Mientras se vestía, lo oyó ir de acá para allá por el pasillo; de vez en cuando cambiaban unas palabras. Antes de salir, Sofía quitó el papel que tapaba una de las cerraduras de la serie de habitaciones selladas y miraron por ellas, uno detrás del otro; vieron el verdoso fulgor del sulfuro y se sintieron perturbados por su aspecto siniestro. Después Sofía volvió a poner el papel en su sitio.

Al bajar la escalera de la casa sintió debilidad en las rodillas, pero por lo demás, aunque no había salido más que una vez desde que cayó enferma, era consciente de tener fuerzas suficientes. Reacia a todo esfuerzo, no había salido a tomar el aire, como debería haber hecho, pero dentro del piso había ejercitado sus miembros en muchas pequeñas tareas. El menudo Chirac, nerviosamente activo e inquieto, quiso tomarla del brazo, pero ella no se lo consintió. La portera y parte de su familia contemplaron con curiosidad a Sofía cuando ésta pasó bajo el arco de entrada, pues los avatares de su enfermedad habían despertado el interés de toda la casa. En el momento en el que el carruaje partía salió la portera a la acera y la saludó con un cumplido, diciendo luego:

—¿No sabrá por casualidad por qué no ha vuelto Madame Foucault a la hora de almorzar, señora?

—¡A la hora de almorzar! —exclamó Sofía—. No volverá hasta mañana.

La portera hizo una mueca.

—¡Ah! ¡Qué cosa más curiosa! Le dijo a mi marido que volvería al cabo de dos horas. ¡Es muy grave! ¡Asunto de negocios!

—No sé nada, señora —dijo Sofía. Ella y Chirac se miraron. La portera le dio las gracias entre dientes y se marchó farfullando confusamente.

El *fiacre* torció por la Rue Laferriére; el caballo resbalaba y patinaba como de costumbre en los adoquines. Pronto estuvieron en el bulevar, en dirección hacia los Campos Elíseos y al Bosque de Bolonia.

La fresca brisa y el sol radiante y la amplia libertad de las calles embriagaron rápidamente a Sofía; es decir, la embriagaron en un sentido totalmente físico. Estaba casi borracha del sabor mismo de la vida, que se le subía a la cabeza. La invadió un dulce éxtasis de bienestar. El piso le pareció una cárcel horrible y vil y se culpó por no haber salido de él antes y con más frecuencia. El aire era una medicina para el cuerpo y también

para el espíritu. Su manera de ver las cosas cambió al instante. Era feliz, pues no vivía ni en el pasado ni en el futuro, sino en aquella hora y solamente para ella. Y en su felicidad se sentía nostálgicamente melancólica por la Sofía que había sufrido aquella cautividad y aquellas congojas. Anhelaba más y más deleite, despreocupadas orgías de placer apasionado, en medio de las cuales pudiera olvidar todo cuidado. ¿Por qué había rechazado el ofrecimiento de Laurence? ¿Por qué no se había lanzado al instante al espléndido fuego de la alegre complacencia, sin hacer caso de nada más que del elemental instinto de los sentidos? Siendo como era muy consciente de su juventud, de su belleza y de su encanto, se sorprendía de su propia negativa. No la lamentaba. La observaba plácidamente como la consecuencia de algún motivo enormemente poderoso que había en ella misma, que no podía ser puesto en duda y con el que no podía razonar, y que era en realidad la esencia de su propia personalidad.

—¿Tengo aspecto de inválida? —preguntó, reclinándose voluptuosamente en el coche, que avanzaba entre una multitud de otros carruajes.

Chirac vaciló.

—¡A fe mía, sí! —dijo al cabo—. Pero le sienta bien. Si no fuera porque sé que le gustan poco los cumplidos, yo...

—¡Pero si me encantan los cumplidos! —exclamó ella—. ¿Qué le ha hecho pensar eso?

—Bueno, entonces —estalló como un adolescente—, está usted más encantadora que nunca.

Ella se entregó con deleite a su admiración.

Tras un silencio, él dijo:

—¡Ah, si usted supiera lo inquieto que estaba por usted mientras estaba lejos...! No sabía cómo decírselo. ¡Inquieto de verdad, ya me entiende! ¿Qué podía hacer yo? Cuénteme algo sobre su enfermedad.

Sofía le dio detalles.

Cuando el *fiacre* entró en la Rue Royale repararon en una muchedumbre que estaba delante de la Madeleine profiriendo gritos y vítores.

El cochero se volvió hacia ellos.

—¡Parece que ha habido una victoria! —dijo.

—¡Una victoria! ¡Ojalá fuera cierto! —murmuró Chirac en tono cínico.

En la Rue Royale la gente corría frenética de un lado a otro, riendo y gesticulando jubilosamente. Los habituales de los cafés se subían a las sillas e incluso a las mesas para contemplar aquella fiebre repentina y de vez en cuando unirse a ella. El *fiacre* tuvo que reducir su marcha hasta ir a paso de peatón. Empezaron a dejarse ver banderas y alfombras en los pisos altos de las casas. La multitud se hacía más densa y más febril. Una y otra vez se oían voces estridentes y enronquecidas que clamaban «¡Victoria! ¡Victoria!».

—¡Dios mío! —exclamó Chirac, temblando—¡Debe de ser una verdadera victoria! ¡Estamos salvados! ¡Estamos salvados!... ¡Oh, sí, es cierto!

—¡Pues claro que es cierto! ¿Qué está usted diciendo? —inquirió el cochero.

En la plaza de la Concordia el *fiacre* tuvo que detenerse del todo. La inmensa plaza era un mar de sombreros blancos y flores y rostros felices, con carruajes anclados como barcos en su superficie. En los tejados vecinos se veía ondear una bandera detrás de otra con la brisa que atemperaba el sol de agosto. Después empezaron a volar sombreros por los aires y los vítores retumbaron en la plaza como ecos de disparos en un valle cerrado. El cochero de Chirac daba saltos como un loco en su asiento y hacía restallar el látigo.

—*Vive la France!* —aulló con toda la fuerza de sus pulmones. Mil gargantas le contestaron.

Entonces se produjo un tumulto detrás de ellos. Otro carruaje avanzaba con lentitud hacia delante. La muchedumbre lo rechazaba, gritando *«Marseillaise! Marseillaise!».* En el coche iba una mujer sola; no era hermosa pero sí distinguida, y su mirada tenía la seguridad propia de alguien que está acostumbrado al homenaje y al aplauso multitudinario.

—¡Es Gueymard! —dijo Chirac a Sofía. Estaba muy pálido. Y gritó también *«Marseillaise!».* Todos sus

rasgos estaban distorsionados.

La mujer se puso en pie y habló a su cochero, que le tendió la mano; ella subió al pescante, se puso en pie sobre él e hizo varias inclinaciones.

«Marseillaise!». El clamor continuaba. Después hubo un estruendo de vítores y el silencio se extendió por la plaza como una inundación. Y en medio de aquel silencio la mujer empezó a cantar *La Marsellesa.* Mientras cantaba, rodaban las lágrimas por sus mejillas. Todos los que estaban cerca lloraban o fruncían el ceño con severidad. En las pausas de la primera estrofa se oía el ruido de los frenos de los caballos o la sirena de un remolcador en el río. El estribillo, marcado por Gueymard con una orgullosa y desafiante sacudida de la cabeza, se alzó como una tormenta tropical, formidable, abrumadora. Sofía, que no había recibido ningún aviso de la emoción que se concentraba en su interior, sollozaba violentamente. Al concluir el himno, el coche de Gueymard fue asaltado por sus adoradores. A su alrededor, en un tumulto clamoroso, los hombres se besaban y abrazaban y lanzaban nubes de sombreros al aire. Chirac se inclinó sobre el costado del carruaje y estrujó la mano de un hombre que se hallaba junto a la rueda.

—¿Quién es? —preguntó Sofía con voz vacilante, para romper la inexplicable tensión que sentía dentro de sí.

—No lo sé —dijo Chirac. Estaba llorando como un niño. Y entonó—: ¡Victoria! ¡A Berlín! ¡Victoria!

V

Sofía subió sola, fatigada, la estropeada escalera de roble hasta el piso. Chirac había decidido que, en las circunstancias de la victoria, haría bien en ir a las oficinas de su periódico mucho antes de lo habitual. La había traído de vuelta a la Rue Breda. Se habían despedido en una especie de ensueño o encantamiento general causado por su participación en el vasto delirio nacional, que en cierto modo dominaba los sentimientos individuales. No definieron sus relaciones. Sólo habían sido conscientes de su emoción.

A Sofía le repugnaba la escalera, que olía a humedad hasta en verano. Pensaba en el piso con horror y ansiaba lugares con vegetación y lujos. En el descansillo había dos hombres de mediana edad, corpulentos y mal vestidos, que al parecer aguardaban a alguien. Sofía buscó la llave y abrió la puerta.

—*Pardon, madame!* —dijo uno de ellos, levantándose el sombrero, y los dos se colaron en el piso detrás de ella. Se quedaron mirando perplejos las tiras de papel pegadas a las paredes.

—¿Qué desean ustedes? —inquirió Sofía con altivez. Estaba muy asustada. Aquella extraordinaria irrupción la devolvió de un golpe a la escala de individuo.

—Soy el portero —dijo el hombre que se había dirigido a ella. Tenía el aire de un artesano superior—. Fue mi mujer quien habló con usted esta tarde. Éste —señalando a su compañero —es la ley. Lo lamento, pero...

La ley saludó y cerró la puerta del piso. Al igual que el portero, la ley desprendía un cierto olor, el olor de la falta de limpieza en un caluroso día de agosto.

—¿El alquiler? —exclamó Sofía.

—¡No, *madame,* no es el alquiler: son los muebles!

Entonces se enteró de la historia de los muebles. Habían pertenecido al portero, que los había adquirido de un inquilino anterior y los había vendido a crédito a *madame* Foucault. Esta había firmado facturas y no las había pagado. Había hecho promesas y las había roto. Había hecho todo menos saldar sus deudas. La habían advertido una y otra vez. Se le había fijado aquel día como último límite y ella había asegurado solemnemente a su acreedor que aquel día pagaría. Al salir de casa había afirmado con exactitud y claridad que volvería antes de comer con todo el dinero. No había dicho nada de que su padre estuviera enfermo.

Sofía percibió poco a poco el alcance de la duplicidad y la cobardía moral de *madame* Foucault. Sin duda se había inventado lo de su padre enfermo. La mujer, en el extremo de una cadena que ningún ingenio

en inventar mentiras podía ya alargar, probablemente se había marchado para evitar una inmediata situación violenta. O acaso se había ausentado sin ningún propósito particular, sino simplemente con la esperanza de que ocurriese algún hecho afortunado. Tal vez esperaba que Sofía, a la que cogerían desprevenida, pagara generosamente. Sofía sonrió a pesar de todo.

—Bien —dijo; yo no puedo hacer nada. Supongo que ustedes tienen que cumplir con su cometido. ¿Me dejarán que recoja mis cosas?

—¡Por supuesto, m*adame!*

Les advirtió del peligro de abrir las habitaciones selladas. El agente de la ley parecía estar dispuesto a quedarse indefinidamente en el pasillo. Ninguna perspectiva de demora le preocupaba.

¡Cuán extraño e inquietante, el triunfo del portero! Era cerrajero de oficio. Él, su mujer y sus hijos vivían en dos pequeñas y oscuras habitaciones junto al arco de la entrada, un fragmento insignificante de la casa. Estaba fuera del hogar unas catorce horas al día, excepto los domingos, día en que fregaba el patio. Todas las demás obligaciones del portero las realizaba su mujer. La pareja siempre presentaba un aspecto de pobreza, desaliño, suciedad y abandono. Pero estaban constantemente cobrando cuotas a todos en la gran casa. Reunían dinero de cuarenta maneras. Vivían para el dinero; todo el mundo tiene algo para lo que vive. ¡Con qué arrogantes gestos descendía *madame* Foucault de un coche ante la puerta! ¡Con qué actitudes y tonos tan respetuosos recibían la mujer y los niños de la portería a aquella cortesana envejecida! Pero por debajo de aquellas ficciones convencionales la verdad era que el portero tenía el látigo. Al fin lo estaba utilizando. Y se había concedido medio día de fiesta para celebrar su segunda adquisición de aquel ostentoso mobiliario y de las pantallas color carmesí. Ésta era una de las crisis espectaculares de su carrera de hombre de enjundia. El estremecimiento nacional de la victoria no había penetrado en el piso con el portero y la ley. Las emociones del portero eran totalmente independientes de la política exterior napoleónica.

Mientras Sofía, conmocionada al bajar de repente a la tierra, recogía sus cosas y se preguntaba dónde iría y si sería prudente consultar a Chirac, oyó agitación en la puerta del piso; llantos, protestas, súplicas. Las puertas de su habitación se abrieron de par en par e irrumpió en ella *madame* Foucault.

—¡Sálveme! —exclamó, dejándose caer al suelo.

La teatralidad poco convincente del gesto ofendió el buen gusto de Sofía. Preguntó con severidad qué esperaba de ella *madame* Foucault. ¿No la había expuesto a sabiendas, sin aviso alguno, a la extrema molestia de la visita de la ley, una visita que en la práctica significaba que Sofía se viera arrojada a la calle?

—¡No debe usted ser dura! —sollozó *madame* Foucault.

Sofía supo la historia completa de los esfuerzos de la mujer para pagar los muebles: un fárrago de insensateces y engaños. *Madame* Foucault confesó demasiadas cosas. Sofía desdeñaba el confesar por confesar. Desdeñaba el impulso que obliga a un ser débil a insistir en su debilidad, a gozarse en el remordimiento y a buscar una excusa para su conducta en el hecho mismo de que no hay excusa. Dedujo que *madame* Foucault, en efecto, se había marchado con la esperanza de que Sofía, atrapada, pagase, y que al final ni siquiera había tenido valor para llevar a cabo su propia artimaña y había regresado apresuradamente, empujada a la audacia por el pánico, para arrojarse a los pies de Sofía, temiendo que ésta no hubiera cedido y se hubieran llevado los muebles. De principio a fin, la conducta de *madame* Foucault había sido fatua, despreciable y vil. Sofía condenó fríamente a *madame* Foucault por haberse permitido venir al mundo con un carácter tan débil y llorón, y por haberse dejado envejecer y volverse fea. El espectáculo que ofrecía aquella mujer era visiblemente vergonzoso.

—¡Sálveme! —repitió—, ¡Hice cuanto pude por usted!

Sofía la odiaba. Pero la lógica de la súplica era irresistible.

—Pero ¿qué puedo hacer? —preguntó, reacia.

—Présteme el dinero. Usted puede hacerlo. Si no lo hace, será el fin para mí.

«¡Y eso estará bien, también!», pensó el lado duro de Sofía.

—¿Cuánto es? —preguntó con desánimo.

—¡No llega a mil francos! —dijo ansiosamente *madame* Foucault—. ¡Todos mis hermosos muebles desaparecerán por menos de mil francos! ¡Sálveme!

Sofía se sentía asqueada.

—Por favor, levántese —dijo, mientras sus dedos jugueteaban sin saber qué hacer.

—¡Se lo devolveré, esté segura! —aseveró *madame* Foucault—¡Se lo juro!

«¿Me toma por tonta —pensó Sofía— con sus juramentos?».

—¡No! —contestó— No le prestaré el dinero. Pero le diré lo que voy a hacer. Compraré los muebles a ese precio, y le prometo revendérselos en cuanto pueda pagarme. De ese modo puede estar tranquila, Pero tengo muy poco dinero. Necesito una garantía. Los muebles tendrán que ser míos hasta que pueda pagarme.

—¡Es usted un ángel de caridad! —exclamó *madame* Foucault, abrazándose a las faldas de Sofía—. Haré todo lo que quiera. ¡Ah! Ustedes, las inglesas, son asombrosas.

Sofía no era un ángel de caridad. Lo que había prometido hacer suponía sacrificio y preocupaciones sin perspectiva de recompensa. Pero no era caridad. Era parte del precio que Sofía pagaba por el ejercicio de sus facultades lógicas; lo pagaba a regañadientes. «¡Hice cuanto pude por usted!». Sofía habría preferido morir antes que recordar a nadie un beneficio otorgado por ella; *madame* Foucault había cometido precisamente esa enormidad. Aquella apelación era imperdonable para un espíritu refinado, pero fue eficaz.

Los hombres estaban detrás de la puerta, escuchando. Sofía tomó el dinero de su reserva de billetes. No hace falta decir que el total era más de mil francos, no menos. *Madame* Foucault se puso inmediatamente a hablar en tono confidencial con el hombre. Sin consultar a Sofía, pidió al alguacil que hiciera un recibo transfiriendo la propiedad de todo el mobiliario a Sofía; el alguacil, al que la belleza de Sofía impulsaba a mostrarse servicial, consintió en ello. Hubo mucho tira y afloja sobre aspectos formales, así como floreos de la pluma entre dedos gruesos y viles y derramamiento de tinta.

Antes de que los hombres se marcharan, *madame* Foucault descorchó una botella de vino para ellos y les ayudó a bebería. Durante toda la tarde mostró una insoportable deferencia hacia Sofía, que prefirió irse a la cama. *Madame* Foucault estuvo conforme con ocupar el dormitorio de la criada, en el sexto piso. Se alegraba de alejarse del sulfuro, pues había penetrado en el corredor una ligera vaharada.

A la mañana siguiente, tras una opresiva noche plagada de malos sueños, Sofía se encontraba demasiado mal para levantarse. Contempló los muebles que había en torno suyo en la pequeña habitación, imaginó los de las restantes habitaciones y acudió a su mente una idea lúgubre: «Todos estos muebles son míos. ¡Nunca me pagará! Me ha cargado con ellos».

Los había comprado baratos, pero era probable que no pudiese venderlos ni siquiera por lo que había pagado. Sin embargo, la sensación de propiedad resultaba tranquilizadora.

La asistenta le trajo café y el periódico de Chirac, que le informó de que la noticia de la victoria que había enloquecido a la ciudad el día anterior era totalmente falsa. Los ojos se le llenaron de lágrimas mientras contemplaba con mirada ausente las ventanas del patio, veladas por cortinas. Poseía juventud y encanto; según las normas, debería ser irresponsable y alegre y tendría que cuidar de ella con indulgencia la sabiduría de una edad admiradora. Pero ella sentía hacia la nación francesa lo que podría sentir una madre por unos hijos adorables que estuvieran sufriendo por su propia insensatez encantadora. Veía a Francia personificada en Chirac. ¡Con cuánta facilidad, a pesar de todo lo que sabía, se había abandonado a la fiebre! Su corazón sangraba por Francia y por Chirac en aquella mañana de reacción y verdades. No podía soportar el recuerdo de la escena en la plaza de la Concordia. *Madame* Foucault seguía sin bajar.

Capítulo VI

EL ASEDIO

I

Madame Foucault entró una tarde en la habitación de Sofía con una peculiar expresión de culpabilidad en su ancha cara; se apretaba el *peignoir* alrededor de su exuberante cuerpo haciéndole formar unos pliegues conscientemente majestuosos, como si se esforzara en probar a Sofía por su porte que, a despecho de sus cambiantes ojos, era la mujer más recta y sincera que jamás había existido.

Era sábado, el tercero de septiembre, un día muy hermoso. Sofía, aquejada de una recaída sin importancia, había permanecido en un estado de inactividad y apenas había salido. Aborrecía el piso, pero le faltaba la energía necesaria para salir de él cada día. No tenía ninguna finalidad suficientemente clara para salir. No podía ir a buscar salud como si fuera a buscar flores. De modo que se quedó en el piso, atisbando el permanente misterio de las vidas ocultas detrás de unas cortinas que se movían de vez en cuando. Y los muros de la casa, pintados de amarillo, y las paredes empapeladas de su habitación la oprimían y la aplastaban. Durante unos pocos días Chirac la había visitado diariamente, animado por la solicitud más adorable. Después dejó de hacerlo. Ella se había cansado de leer los periódicos, que se quedaban allí sin abrir. Las relaciones entre *madame* Foucault y ella, y su situación en el piso, de cuyo mobiliario era ahora la propietaria legal, eran cuestiones pendientes. Pero la de su alojamiento se arregló en unos términos según los cuales el coste de su alimentación y el servicio de *madame* Foucault se quedó en la mitad; de este modo sus gastos se reducían al mínimo posible, unos dieciocho francos a la semana. Una idea flotaba en el aire —como un descubrimiento científico justo antes de que varios investigadores independientes lo hicieran de forma simultánea—: que ella y *madame* Foucault colaboraran para alquilar habitaciones amuebladas con una buena rentabilidad. Sofía percibía la proximidad de aquella idea y deseaba que el pensamiento de cualquier asociación reconocida entre ella y *madame* Foucault le resultara escandalosa, pero no pudo.

—Aquí hay una señora y un caballero que quieren una habitación —empezó *madame* Foucault—, una habitación grande y agradable, amueblada.

—¡Oh! —exclamó Sofía—¿Quiénes son?

—Pagarán ciento treinta francos al mes por anticipado, por la habitación de en medio.

—¿Se la ha enseñado ya? —inquirió Sofía. Y su tono implicaba que de una u otra manera era consciente de su derecho a supervisar el negocio de *madame* Foucault.

—No —respondió ésta—. Me dije que primero le pediría a usted consejo.

—Entonces ¿van a pagar todo ese dinero por una habitación que no han visto?

—La cosa es —dijo *madame* Foucault tímidamente— que la señora había visto antes la habitación. Yo la conozco algo. Es una antigua inquilina. Vivió aquí unas semanas.

—¿En esa habitación?

—¡Oh, no! Entonces era bastante pobre.

—¿Dónde están?

—En el pasillo. Ella, la señora, está muy bien. Naturalmente, hay que vivir, y ella también, como todo el mundo, pero verdaderamente está muy bien. ¡Muy respetable! Nadie diría que... Luego estarían las comidas. Podríamos pedir un franco por el *café au lait,* dos y medio por el almuerzo y tres por la cena. Sin contar otras cosas. Eso haría más de quinientos francos al mes, por lo menos. ¿Y qué nos costaría a nosotras? ¡Casi nada! Por lo que parece, él es un plutócrata... Así podría yo devolverle el dinero muy pronto...

—¿Están casados?

—¡Ah! Ya sabe, no se puede pedir el certificado de matrimonio. —M*adame* Foucault indicó con un ademán que la Rue Bréda no era el paraíso de los santos.

—Cuando vino antes, esta señora, ¿estaba con el mismo hombre? —preguntó Sofía con frialdad.

—¡Ah, a fe mía, no! —exclamó *madame* Foucault, torciendo el gesto—¡Era de mala calaña, el otro, un...! Ah, no.

—¿Por qué me pide consejo? —la interrogó bruscamente Sofía con voz dura y hostil—, ¿Es que acaso me concierne?

Al instante asomaron lágrimas a los ojos de *madame* Foucault.

—No sea cruel conmigo —imploró.

—No soy cruel —dijo Sofía en el mismo tono.

—¿Se marchará si acepto esta oferta?

Hubo una pausa.

—Sí —dijo Sofía rotundamente. Trató de ser magnánima, generosa y comprensiva, pero no hubo signo alguno de estas cualidades en su manera de hablar.

—¡Y si se lleva los muebles, que son suyos..!

Sofía guardó silencio.

—¿Cómo voy a vivir? Dígamelo —le preguntó débilmente *madame* Foucault.

—¡Siendo respetable y tratando con gente respetable! —dijo Sofía, inflexible, en un tono acerado.

—¡Soy muy desdichada! —murmuró la mujer mayor—. Sin embargo, usted es más fuerte que yo.

Bruscamente se secó los ojos, dejó escapar un ligero sollozo y salió apresuradamente de la habitación. Sofía escuchó junto a la puerta y la oyó despedir a los aspirantes a inquilinos de la mejor habitación. Se sorprendió de tener tanto ascendiente moral sobre la mujer, ella, tan joven e ingenua. Pues, desde luego, no había tenido ninguna intención de llevarse los muebles. Oyó a *madame* Foucault sollozar calladamente en una de las otras habitaciones e hizo una mueca.

Antes de que acabara la tarde sucedió un acontecimiento verdaderamente sorprendente. Al darse cuenta de que *madame* Foucault no daba señas de moverse, Sofía, que era de buen natural en su fuero interno, aunque no en su lenguaje, acudió a ella y le dijo:

—¿Me ocupo yo misma de la cena?

M*adame* Foucault sollozó de forma más audible.

—Sería muy amable por su parte —consiguió por fin responder, de manera poco articulada.

Sofía se puso el sombrero y fue a la tienda de ultramarinos. El tendero, que llevaba un establecimiento muy concurrido en la esquina de la Rue Clausel, era un hombre adinerado de mediana edad. Había enviado a su joven esposa y a sus dos hijos a Normandía hasta que la victoria sobre los prusianos pareciese más segura; preguntó a Sofía si era cierto que se alquilaba una buena habitación en el piso en el que vivía. Su criada había caído enferma de viruela y él se sentía atacado por temores y ansiedades por todas partes; no quería entrar en su propio piso por miedo a una posible infección; le agradaba Sofía y *madame* Foucault era clienta suya, con intervalos, desde hacía veinte años. Al cabo de una hora había acordado alquilar la habitación por ochenta francos al mes y hacer sus comidas allí. Las condiciones eran modestas, pero la respetabilidad era prodigiosa. Toda la gloria de esta operación recayó sobre Sofía.

Madame Foucault estaba muy impresionada. Como era típico en ella, empezó inmediatamente a elaborar una teoría según la cual la joven no tenía más que salir a la calle para descubrir inquilinos ideales para las habitaciones. Además, consideraba la llegada del tendero como una recompensa de la Providencia por haberse negado aquélla a aceptar unas ganancias pecaminosas. Sofía se juzgaba personalmente responsable del bienestar del tendero, de modo que acometió ella misma la preparación del cuarto. M*adame* Foucault estaba asombrada de su dominio de las tareas de un ama de casa y de lo ingeniosas que eran sus ideas en

cuanto a la disposición de los muebles. Se sentó a contemplarla con una admiración aduladora pero auténtica.

Aquella noche, estando Sofía ya acostada, *madame* Foucault entró en la habitación, se dejó caer de hinojos junto al borde de la cama y rogó a Sofía que fuese su apoyo moral para siempre. Hizo una confesión general. Le explicó cómo había aborrecido siempre la negación de la respetabilidad, cómo la respetabilidad era lo único que había deseado con pasión toda su vida. Dijo que, si Sofía deseaba ser su soda para alquilar habitaciones amuebladas a personas respetables, la obedecería en todo. Le hizo una lista de todos los rasgos de carácter de la joven que ella admiraba. Pidió a Sofía que ejerciese su influencia sobre ella, que la respaldase. Insistió en que dormiría en el sexto piso, en el diminuto cuarto de la criada, y tuvo una visión de tres habitaciones alquiladas a prósperos comerciantes. Estaba en un éxtasis de arrepentimiento y buenas intenciones.

Sofía accedió a la proposición de negocios, ya que no tenía ninguna otra cosa en perspectiva, y compartió la optimista visión de *madame* Foucault acerca de la rentabilidad de las habitaciones. Con tres inquilinos en pensión completa, las dos podrían comer por nada ellas mismas y sin embargo obtener beneficios de las comidas, y los alquileres volverían a ser una ganancia neta.

Y sintió remordimientos por la avejentada e irresponsable *madame* Foucault, cuya sinceridad era evidente. La asociación entre ellas era sin duda extraña, hubiera sido imposible explicarla en la plaza de San Lucas... Y no obstante, si es que la virtud de la caridad cristiana significaba algo, ¿qué se podría aducir, en puridad, contra aquella asociación?

—¡Ah! —murmuró *madame* Focault, besando las manos de Sofía—; es hoy, pues, cuando vuelvo a empezar mi vida. ¡Ya verá; ya verá! ¡Me ha salvado usted!

Resultaba un extraño espectáculo aquella cortesana gastada por los años, desfigurada, medio postrada ante aquella criatura hermosa y joven, orgullosa por la fuerza instintiva de su carácter. Era casi un cuadro didáctico, repleto de lecciones para los depravados. Sofía era más feliz de lo que había sido durante años. Tenía un objetivo en la existencia; disponía de un alma de escasa consistencia que podía moldear a su voluntad según su sabiduría; y tanta compasión decía mucho en su mérito. La opinión pública no podría intimidarla, pues en su caso no existía; no conocía a nadie; nadie tenía derecho a poner en tela de juicio sus actos.

Al día siguiente, domingo, trabajaron mucho en las habitaciones desde temprana hora de la mañana. El tendero quedó instalado en la suya, y las otras dos se limpiaron como jamás se había hecho. A las cuatro el tiempo era más espléndido todavía y *madame* Foucault dijo:

—¿Y si diéramos un paseo por el bulevar?

Sofía reflexionó. Eran sodas.

—Muy bien —accedió.

El bulevar estaba atestado de muchedumbres alegres y risueñas. Todos los cafés estaban llenos. Nadie que no estuviera al tanto hubiera sospechado que las noticias de Sedán habían llegado hacía escasamente un día a la capital. Reinaba un delirante regocijo a la centelleante luz del sol. Mientras las dos mujeres paseaban, satisfechas de su ingenio y de su resolución, se toparon con un miembro de la Guardia Nacional que, subido a una escalera, raspaba la «N»[53] del rótulo oficial de un proveedor de la corte. Intercambiaba pullas con un círculo de bocas abiertas. Fue así como *madame* Foucault y Sofía se enteraron de que se había proclamado la república.

—*Vive la République!* —exclamó atropelladamente *madame* Foucault; luego pidió disculpas a Sofía por su arrebato.

Estuvieron un buen rato escuchando a un hombre que contaba extrañas historias sobre la emperatriz.

De improviso, Sofía reparó en que *madame* Foucault ya no estaba a su lado. Miró en torno suyo y la vio conversando en tono serio con un joven cuyo rostro le resultó familiar. Recordó que era el joven con el que *madame* Foucault se había peleado la noche en que Sofía la encontró de bruces en el corredor; era el último adorador que le quedaba a la cortesana.

La cara de la mujer estaba muy cambiada por efecto de la agitación. Sofía se apartó, ofendida. Estuvo unos momentos observando a la pareja desde lejos y después, enfurecida por la desilusión, huyó de la fiebre de los bulevares y regresó a casa. M*adame* Foucault no volvió. Al parecer, estaba sentenciada a ser juguete del destino. A los dos días, Sofía recibió una carta suya garabateada, en la que le informaba de que su amante le

había pedido que lo acompañase a Bruselas, ya que París pronto sería peligroso. «Me sigue adorando. Es un muchacho de lo más encantador. Como he dicho siempre, es la gran pasión de mi vida. Soy feliz. No me permitiría volver con usted. Se ha gastado dos mil francos en ropa para mí, ya que, claro está, yo no tenía nada». Y continuaba en ese tenor. Ni una palabra de disculpa. Sofía, al leer la carta, dio por hecho que la verdad estaba un tanto exagerada y retorcida.

—¡Qué estupidez juvenil! ¡Qué estupidez! —estalló, airada. No se refería a sí misma; se refería al fatuo adorador de aquella horrible mujer en decadencia. Nunca volvió a verla. Sin duda, *madame* Foucault realizó su propia predicción en lo tocante a su destino final, pero en Bruselas.

II

Sofía contaba aún con unas cien libras; si hubiera decidido irse de París y de Francia, nada había que le impidiera hacerlo. Tal *vez,* si por casualidad hubiera visitado la estación de Saint Lazare o del Norte, la visión de decenas de miles de personas huyendo hacia el mar hubiera despertado en ella el deseo de escapar también del vago peligro que se avecinaba. Pero no hizo visita alguna a esas estaciones; estaba demasiado ocupada cuidando del señor Niepce, el tendero. Además, no abandonaría sus muebles, que le parecían una especie de roca. Con un piso lleno de muebles, consideraba que tenía que ser capaz de idear una forma de vida; la empresa de llegar a ser independiente ya había comenzado. Deseaba con ardor ser independiente, utilizar para sí misma las dotes de organización, previsión, sentido común y tenacidad que sabía que poseía y que habían permanecido ociosas. Y detestaba la idea de huir.

Chirac regresó tan inopinadamente como había desaparecido; el periódico lo había enviado fuera. De boquilla la exhortó a marcharse, pero sus ojos decían una cosa bien distinta. Una tarde estaba de un talante de sincera desesperación, como el que se hubiera atrevido a mostrar sólo a alguien con quien tuviera gran confianza.

—Vendrán a París —dijo—; no hay nada que los detenga. ¡Y entonces...! —Soltó una carcajada cínica. Pero, cuando la apremió a marcharse, dijo ella:

—¿Y mis muebles? Y he prometido al señor Niepce cuidar de él.

Entonces Chirac le hizo saber que no tenía alojamiento y que le gustaría alquilar una de sus habitaciones. Ella se mostró de acuerdo.

Poco después le presentó a un conocido de mediana edad llamado Carlier, el secretario general de su periódico, que quería alquilar un cuarto. Así, quiso la buena suerte que Sofía alquilara inmediatamente todas sus habitaciones y se asegurara más de doscientos francos al mes, aparte de los beneficios que le dejaban las comidas. Con ocasión de la llegada del último huésped, Chirac (y también su compañero) hizo gala de gran optimismo, reiterando su absoluta seguridad de que París jamás podría ser sitiado. En suma, Sofía no le creyó. Creía al Chirac sinceramente desesperado. No tenía ninguna información, ninguna teoría general, que justificasen su pesimismo; nada más que la convicción interna de que la raza capaz de comportarse como había visto en la plaza de la Concordia se vería abocada a la derrota. Amaba a la raza francesa, pero toda la práctica sagacidad teutona que había en ella deseaba cuidar de ella en sus dificultades y se sentía muy enojada con ella por ser tan inepta para cuidar de sí misma.

Dejaba hablar a los hombres y, con un indiferente desdén por sus discusiones y sus certezas, se ocupaba de sus preparativos. En esta época, sobrecargada de trabajo y acosada por nuevas responsabilidades y riesgos, era más feliz durante días seguidos de lo que había sido nunca, simplemente porque tenía un propósito en la vida y dependía de sí misma. Su desconocimiento de la situación militar y política era completo; la situación no le interesaba. Lo que le interesaba era que tenía tres hombres a los que dar de comer total o parcialmente, según subía el precio de los comestibles. Compraba comestibles. Compraba cincuenta picotines de patatas a un franco el picotín y otros cincuenta a franco y cuarto el picotín, el doble del precio normal; diez jamones a dos francos y medio la libra; gran cantidad de verduras y frutas en conserva, un saco de harina, arroz, galletas, café, salchicha de Lyon, ciruelas pasas, higos pasos y mucha madera y carbón. Pero la principal de sus compras era el queso, pues decía su madre que pan, queso y agua componen una dieta completa. Muchos de estos artículos los obtenía del tendero. Todos, excepto la harina y las galletas, los almacenaba en el sótano perteneciente al piso; tras una demora de varios días, pues los obreros parisienses estaban demasiado eufóricos por el advenimiento de la república como para rebajarse a trabajar, hizo que se

pusiera una cerradura nueva en la puerta del sótano. Sus actividades eran la sensación de la casa. Todo el mundo la admiraba, pero nadie la imitaba.

Una mañana, cuando iba a la compra, encontró un aviso pegado a los postigos de las ventanas de su lechería, que estaba en la Rue Notre Dame de Lorette: «Cerrado por falta de leche». El sitio había empezado. Fue el cierre de la lechería lo que dio forma al asedio en su mente, y los huevos a cinco sous la unidad. Fue a otro sitio a por la leche y la pagó a un franco el litro. Aquella tarde dijo a sus inquilinos que el precio de las comidas se duplicaría y que si cualquiera de los caballeros pensaba que podía obtener comidas igual de buenas en otra parte estaba en libertad de ir a comer donde quisiera. Reforzó su postura la aparición de otro candidato a una habitación, un amigo de Niepce. Al momento le ofreció su propio cuarto a ciento cincuenta francos mensuales.

—Ya ve —dijo—, hay un piano.

—Pero yo no toco el piano —protestó el hombre, escandalizado por el precio.

—Eso no es culpa mía.

Accedió a pagar el precio pedido por la habitación por la oportunidad de tener buena comida mucho más barata que en los restaurantes. Al igual que el señor Niepce, era un «viudo de asedio»; tenía a su mujer refugiada en Bretaña. Sofía se trasladó al cuarto de la criada, en la sexta planta. Medía nueve pies por siete y no tenía ventana, sólo un tragaluz; pero Sofía estaba en camino de sacar un beneficio de cuatro libras semanales por lo menos, una vez pagado todo.

Por la noche, cuando se instaló en aquella cámara, en medio de una población de domésticos y gente pobre, estuvo trabajando hasta muy tarde; los destellos de sus velas brillaban de forma intermitente a través del tragaluz en el cielo negro; a intervalos iba y venía por la escalera con una vela. Sin que se diera cuenta, se había ido formando una multitud en la calle, frente a la casa; hacia la una de la madrugada, una fila de soldados despertó al portero e invadió el patio, y todas las ventanas se vieron repentinamente pobladas de cabezas. Sofía fue convocada para probar que no era una espía que estaba haciendo señas a los prusianos. Pasaron tres cuartos de hora antes de que su inocencia quedase establecida y las escaleras libres de uniformes y de curiosos despeinados. La sinrazón, infantil e imposible, de la sospecha contra ella culminó en la mente de Sofía la ruina de la reputación de los franceses como raza sensata. Al día siguiente estuvo extremadamente cáustica con sus huéspedes. Salvo por este episodio, la frecuencia de los uniformes militares por las calles, el precio de los alimentos y el hecho de que al menos en una casa de cada cuatro ondeaba la bandera sanitaria o la de una embajada extranjera (en una absurda esperanza de inmunidad respecto del inminente bombardeo), el sitio no existía para Sofía. Los hombres hablaban a menudo de sus funciones de centinela y se iban por uno o dos días a las murallas, pero ella estaba demasiado ocupada para escucharles. No pensaba en otra cosa que en su empeño, que absorbía todas sus capacidades. Se levantaba a las seis de la mañana, en plena oscuridad; a las siete y media el señor Niepce y su amigo tenían el desayuno servido y ya había mucho trabajo general hecho. A las ocho salía al mercado. Cuando alguien le preguntaba por qué seguía comprando, a alto precio, artículos de los que tenía todo un almacén, respondía: «Estoy guardando todo eso para cuando las cosas sean mucho más caras». Esto se consideraba de una asombrosa astucia.

El quince de octubre pagó la renta trimestral del piso, cuatrocientos francos, y fue aceptada como arrendataria. Sus oídos pronto se acostumbraron al ruido de los cañones; se sentía como si siempre hubiera sido ciudadana de París y como si París siempre hubiera sido una ciudad sitiada. No se hacía cábalas sobre el final del asedio; vivía al día. De vez en cuando tenía un asomo de miedo, cuando el cañoneo, por unos momentos, se tornaba más ruidoso, o cuando oía que se habían librado batallas en tal o cual suburbio. Pero luego se decía que era absurdo atemorizarse cuando uno estaba con un par de millones de personas, todas en el mismo apuro que uno. Se reconcilió con todo. Incluso empezó a gustarle su diminuto dormitorio, en parte porque era fácil mantenerlo caldeado (el problema del calor artificial estaba adquiriendo gravedad en París), y en parte porque le garantizaba la intimidad. Abajo, en el piso, todo cuanto se hiciera o dijera en una habitación podía oírse más o menos en todas las demás, al haber tantas puertas.

Su existencia, en la primera mitad de noviembre, se había vuelto regular, con una monotonía casi absoluta. Sólo el número de las comidas servidas a sus huéspedes cambiaba un poco de un día a otro. Todas las colaciones, salvo alguna por la tarde, de vez en cuando, las llevaba la asistenta a las habitaciones. Sofía no se dejaba ver mucho, excepto a primera hora de la tarde. Aunque seguía subiendo el precio y ahora estaba vendiendo sus reservas con enormes ganancias, ni siquiera se acercaba a lo que se pagaba entonces fuera. Estaba muy indignada por la manera en que París estaba siendo explotada por sus tenderos, que tenían grandes reservas de forraje y estaban atesorando para cuando subiera. Pero el ejemplo que daban era demasiado poderoso para que no hiciera ningún caso de él; se contentaba con la mitad de lo que ganaban ellos. Sólo al señor Niepce cobraba más que a los demás, porque era tendero. Los cuatro apreciaban el paraíso

en el que vivían. En ellos se desarrolló esa grata sensación de seguridad que los hombres solos hallan bajo el techo de una casera que es al mismo tiempo puntual, honrada y devota de la limpieza. Sofía colgó una pizarra junto a la puerta del piso y en ella apuntaban sus peticiones en cuanto a comidas, horas de llamada, lavado de ropa, etc. Sofía jamás cometía un error ni olvidaba nada. La perfección de la máquina doméstica asombraba a aquellos hombres, que estaban acostumbrados a algo muy distinto y todos los días oían las desgarradoras historias de incomodidades y estafas que contaban sus conocidos. Incluso admiraban a Sofía por hacerles pagar, si no demasiado, bastante. Les parecía maravilloso que les dijera el precio de las cosas de antemano y que hasta les enseñara cómo evitar gastos, sobre todo en materia de calefacción. Les proporcionó alfombrillas a todos, de modo que podían estar cómodamente en sus habitaciones sin más que una pequeña estufa de carbón para las manos. Fue cosa natural que llegaran a tenerla por el parangón y milagro de las mujeres. Le atribuían toda suerte de buenas cualidades. Según ellos, nunca en la historia de la humanidad había habido una mujer como aquélla, ¡era imposible! Adquirió un carácter legendario entre los amigos de sus huéspedes: ¡una criatura joven y elegante, extremadamente bella, orgullosa, regia, asombrosa administradora, excelente cocinera y artífice de extraños platos ingleses, totalmente digna de confianza, de una puntualidad absoluta y de costumbres ordenadas... Les encantaba el ligero acento inglés que daba un toque exótico a su francés, muy correcto y que hacía libre uso de los modismos. En suma, Sofía era para ellos perfecta, una mujer imposible. Hiciera lo que hiciera, estaba bien.

Y cada noche subía a su habitación físicamente extenuada, pero con la cabeza lo bastante clara como para cuadrar las cuentas y revisar el dinero del que disponía. Lo hacía en la cama, con unos gruesos guantes. Si muchas veces no dormía bien, no era por los distantes cañonazos, sino por su constante preocupación por las cuestiones financieras. Estaba ganando dinero y quería ganar más. Estaba siempre inventando maneras de hacer economías. Era tal su ansia por lograr la independencia, que estaba siempre pensando en el dinero. Empezó a amar el oro y el hecho de atesorarlo, y a odiar el gastarlo.

Una mañana, su asistenta, que por fortuna era casi tan exacta como la propia Sofía, no se presentó. Cuando llegó el momento de servir el desayuno al señor Niepce, Sofía vaciló y luego decidió ocuparse personalmente del anciano. Llamó a su puerta y entró osadamente, portando la bandeja y la vela. Él se sorprendió al verla; llevaba un delantal azul, como la criada, pero era imposible confundirla con ésta. Niepce parecía más viejo en la cama que cuando estaba vestido. Tenía un aspecto ridículo y poco digno, corriente en los hombres de edad antes del arreglo matinal; el gorro de dormir no lo mejoraba. Su rotunda panza levantaba la ropa de la cama, sobre la cual, para obtener un poco más de calor, había extendido unas prendas poco majestuosas. Sofía sonrió para sí; pero un pensamiento suavizó el desdén que contenía aquella secreta sonrisa: «¡Pobre viejo!». Le dijo en pocas palabras que suponía que la criada estaba enferma. Él tosió y se removió con nerviosismo. Su rostro sencillo y benévolo resplandeció sobre ella con expresión paternal cuando Sofía colocó la bandeja junto a la cama.

—Tengo que abrir la ventana un momentito —dijo, y así lo hizo—. El frío aire de la calle se coló por los postigos cerrados y el anciano hizo un ruido como si tiritara. Sofía empujó los postigos y cerró la ventana, y luego hizo lo propio con las otras dos ventanas. Era casi de día en la habitación.

—Ya no le hará falta la vela —dijo, volviendo al lado de la cama para apagarla.

El hombre bondadoso y paternal le pasó el brazo por la cintura. Tonificada por el aire puro y con la idea del aspecto ridículo del hombre todavía en la mente, el gesto la dejó estupefacta por un instante. Nunca había pensado en el temperamento del viejo tendero, esposo de una mujer joven. No siempre podía tener presente de forma imaginativa el efecto de su propia irradiación en aquellas circunstancias. Pero pasado un momento entró en acción su precoz cinismo, que estaba latente. «¡Claro! ¡Ya me lo podía haber esperado!», pensó con irritado desprecio.

—¡Quite esa mano! —dijo con aspereza al dócil y viejo tonto. No se movió.

Él obedeció con mansedumbre.

—¿Quiere seguir en mi casa? —le preguntó Sofía; como no obtuvo una pronta respuesta, dijo en tono extremadamente imperioso—: ¡Responda!

—Sí —dijo él débilmente.

—Bien, pues compórtese como es debido.

Se dirigió a la puerta.

—Yo sólo quería... —balbuceó el hombre.

—No deseo saber lo que quería —atajó ella.

Posteriormente se preguntó si alguien habría oído algo del incidente. Los demás desayunos los dejó fuera de las respectivas habitaciones, junto a la puerta; y a partir de entonces hizo lo mismo con el de Niepce.

La sirvienta no volvió más. Había atrapado la viruela y murió, perdiendo así una buena colocación. Por extraño que resulte, Sofía no la reemplazó; la tentación de ahorrarse sus salarios y su alimentación fue demasiado fuerte. Sin embargo, no podía pasarse horas esperando ante la puerta del panadero oficial y del carnicero oficial, haciendo cola con multitud de mujeres heladas, para conseguir las raciones diarias de pan y las raciones trisemanales de carne. Empleó para ello al chico del portero, a dos *sous* la hora. A veces venía con las manos tan frías y amoratadas que apenas podía sostener las preciadas tarjetas que daban derecho a las raciones y que costaban a Chirac una o dos horas de espera en las oficinas del alcalde cada semana. Sofía podía alimentar a su rebaño sin recurrir a las raciones oficiales, pero no quería sacrificar la economía que representaban. Pidió ropa de abrigo para el chico del portero y recibió botas de Chirac, guantes de Carlier y un gran abrigo de Niepce. El tiempo se tornó más severo y las provisiones más caras. Un día vendió a la mujer de un farmacéutico que vivía en el primer piso, por ciento diez francos, un jamón por el que había pagado menos de treinta. Sintió un estremecimiento de gozo al recibir un hermoso billete y una moneda de oro a cambio de un simple jamón. Para entonces, el total de sus recursos en efectivo ascendían a casi cinco mil francos. Era asombroso. Y las reservas del sótano eran todavía considerables, y el saco de harina que estorbaba en la cocina no iba aún por la mitad. La muerte de la fiel sirvienta, cuando se enteró de ella, no causó sino poco efecto en Sofía, tan sobrecargada de trabajo que sus nervios no tenían energía sobrante para pesares sentimentales. La criada, a cuyo lado había pasado con regularidad muchas horas en la cocina, de manera que conocía cada arruga de su rostro y cada pliegue de su vestido, se desvaneció de la memoria de Sofía.

Sofía limpiaba y arreglaba dos de las habitaciones por la mañana y otras dos a primera hora de la tarde. Había estado en hoteles en los que estaban a cargo de una sola doncella quince habitaciones y, pensaba, ¡cómo no iba a poder gobernárselas ella con cuatro en los intervalos de la cocina y otras tareas! Esto se dijo a modo de excusa por no tomar otra criada. Una tarde estaba frotando los pomos de bronce de las numerosas puertas de la habitación que ocupaba el señor Niepce cuando de improviso entró el tendero.

Ella le dirigió una mirada severa; la de los ojos del hombre era tímida. Había entrado en el piso sin hacer ruido. Sofía recordó haberle dicho, contestando a una pregunta suya, que ahora arreglaba su habitación por la tarde. ¿Por qué había dejado la tienda? Colgó el sombrero detrás de la puerta con el meticuloso esmero de un anciano. Después se quitó el abrigo y se frotó las manos.

—Hace bien en llevar guantes, *madame* —dijo—. Hace un tiempo de perros.

—No los llevo por el frío —contestó ella—, sino para no estropearme las manos.

—¡Ah, es verdad! ¡Muy bien! ¡Muy bien! ¿Puedo pedirle un poco de leña? ¿Dónde puedo encontrarla? No quiero molestarla.

Ella rechazó su ayuda y trajo leña de la cocina, contando los troncos en voz audible delante de él.

—¿Enciendo ya el fuego? —le preguntó.

—Yo lo encenderé —repuso él.

—Deme una cerilla, por favor.

Mientras ella estaba colocando la leña y el papel, el hombre le dijo:

—*Madame,* ¿quiere escucharme?

—¿Qué hay?

—No se enfade —prosiguió él—¿No le he probado que soy capaz de respetarla? Sigo firme en ese respeto. Y es con todo ese respeto como le digo que la amo, *madame*... ¡No; tenga calma, *madame,* se lo ruego! —La cosa era que Sofía no mostraba señal alguna de no tener calma—. Es cierto que tengo esposa. Pero ¿qué quiere usted...? Ella está lejos. La amo a usted con locura —siguió diciendo, con digno respeto—. Ya sé que soy viejo; pero soy rico. Comprendo su carácter. Es usted una dama; es decidida, directa, sincera y una mujer de negocios. Siento por usted el mayor respeto. Se puede hablar con usted como no se podría con ninguna otra mujer. Prefiere la claridad y la sinceridad. M*adame,* le daré dos mil francos al mes y todo lo que quiera de mi tienda si es amable conmigo. Estoy muy solo; necesito la compañía de un ser encantador que me muestre cordialidad. Dos mil francos al mes. Es mi dinero.

Se secó la brillante calva con la mano.

Sofía estaba inclinada sobre el fuego. Volvió la cabeza hacia él.

—¿Ha terminado? —dijo con todo sosiego.

—Puede contar con mi discreción —añadió él en voz baja—. Aprecio sus escrúpulos. Iría, muy tarde, a su habitación del sexto piso. Se podría arreglar... Ya ve, soy directo, como usted.

Ella tuvo un impulso de ordenarle tempestuosamente que abandonara el piso, pero no era un impulso auténtico. Era un viejo tonto. ¿Por qué no tratarlo como tal? Tomarlo en serio sería absurdo. Además, era un huésped muy rentable.

—¡No sea estúpido! —dijo con cruel tranquilidad— No sea un viejo bobo.

Y el benévolo pero fatuo libidinoso de mediana edad contempló cómo la encantadora visión de Sofía, con su coqueto delantal y sus graciosos guantes, se esfumaba de la habitación. El comerciante salió de la casa y el costoso fuego caldeó una habitación vacía.

Sofía estaba enfadada con él. Era evidente que tenía planeada la proposición. Aunque era capaz de ser respetuoso, lo era también de idear argucias. Pero ella supuso que aquellos franceses eran todos iguales: repugnantes, y decidió que sería inútil preocuparse por un hecho universal. Lo que pasaba era que no tenían vergüenza; había sido muy prudente al instalarse bien lejos, en la sexta planta. Esperaba que ninguno de los otros inquilinos hubiese oído la insultante insolencia de Niepce. No estaba segura de que Chirac no se hallara en su habitación, escribiendo.

Aquella noche no se oyó ningún cañonazo en la lejanía; Sofía no pudo conciliar el sueño durante un tiempo. Se despertó con un sobresalto después de echar una cabezada y encendió una cerilla para mirar el reloj. Se había olvidado de darle cuerda, omisión que indicaba que el tendero la había perturbado más de lo que creía. No podía estar segura de cuánto había dormido. Lo mismo podían ser las dos que las seis. ¡Imposible descansar! Se levantó y se vistió (por si era tan tarde como ella temía) y bajó sigilosamente la interminable y crujiente escalera con la vela. Conforme bajaba estaba más convencida de que estaba en mitad de la noche y pisaba con más suavidad. No había ruido alguno salvo el de sus pisadas. Con su llave abrió cautelosamente la puerta del piso y entró. Entonces oyó el ruidoso tictac del pequeño reloj barato de la cocina. En aquel preciso instante crujió otra puerta y Chirac, con el pelo alborotado pero totalmente vestido, apareció en el corredor.

—¡Así que ha decidido venderse a él! —susurró.

Ella se apartó instintivamente y notó que se sonrojaba. No supo qué decir. Vio que Chirac estaba encolerizado y enormemente conmovido. Se acercó lentamente a ella, medio agazapado. Sofía no había visto nunca nada tan teatral como aquel movimiento y la agitación que se revelaba en su rostro. Le pareció que también ella tenía que ponerse teatral, que tenía que desdeñar noblemente su infame sugerencia, su ataque injustificado. Aun suponiendo que hubiera decidido venderse al viejo pachá, ¿a él qué le importaba? Un digno silencio, una mirada aniquiladora, eso era todo lo que se merecía. Pero no fue capaz de tan heroica conducta.

—¿Qué hora es? —añadió débilmente.

—Las tres —respondió él con sorna.

—Se me olvidó dar cuerda al reloj —dijo Sofía—. Y he bajado a ver.

—¡En efecto! —Utilizaba un tono sarcástico, como si dijera «la estaba esperando, y aquí está».

Ella se dijo que no le debía nada, pero no dejaba de pensar que eran los únicos jóvenes que había en el piso y que sí le debía la prueba de que estaba libre de culpa en cuanto al supremo deshonor de la juventud. Hizo acopio de fuerzas y lo miró.

—Debería estar avergonzado —le dijo— Va a despertar a los demás.

—¿Y el señor Niepce? ¿Le hará falta que lo despierten?

—El señor Niepce no está aquí —dijo ella.

La puerta de Niepce no estaba cerrada con llave. Sofía la abrió y entró en la habitación, que estaba vacía y no daba señal alguna de haber sido utilizada.

—¡Entre y convénzase! —insistió la joven.

Chirac entró y puso cara larga.

Sofía sacó su reloj del bolsillo.

—Y ahora dé cuerda a mi reloj y póngalo en hora, por favor.

Vio que estaba sufriendo una agonía. No pudo coger el reloj. Los ojos se le llenaron de lágrimas. Después ocultó el rostro y se marchó precipitadamente. Ella oyó un murmullo, dificultado por los sollozos, en que le pareció que decía «¡perdóneme!» y una puerta que se cerraba de golpe. Y en el silencio distinguió los ronquidos regulares del señor Carlier. Sofía se echó a llorar también. Una neblina le impedía ver con claridad; entró en la cocina tropezando y agarró el reloj, que se llevó arriba, temblando en el intenso frío de la noche. Estuvo largo rato llorando sin ruido. «¡Qué vergüenza! ¡Qué vergüenza!», se decía. Sin embargo, no echaba toda la culpa a Chirac. La helada la obligó a meterse en la cama, pero no pudo dormir. Seguía llorando. Al amanecer tenía los ojos hinchados. Bajó de nuevo a la cocina. Él se había dejado el sombrero. En la pizarra se leía: «No comeré aquí hoy».

III

Sus relaciones cambiaron de modo permanente. Durante varios días no se vieron ni una sola vez; cuando, al final de la semana, Chirac se vio por fin obligado a enfrentarse a Sofía para pagar su cuenta, su expresión era grave en extremo. Era evidente que se consideraba un criminal sin ninguna defensa para su delito. No parecía hacer intento alguno de ocultar su estado de ánimo. Pero no decía nada. En cuanto a Sofía, conservaba un semblante de afable alegría. Se esforzaba en convencerlo con su actitud de que no abrigaba ningún resentimiento, que estaba decidida a olvidar el incidente, que, en suma, era el ángel de perdón de sus sueños. Sin embargo, no conseguía mostrarse totalmente natural. ¡Viendo lo desdichado que era, le habría sido imposible ser totalmente natural y al mismo tiempo totalmente alegre!

Poco después, la atmósfera social del piso empezó a tomarse quejumbrosa, discutidora y perversa. Todos tenían los nervios muy tensos. Lo mismo ocurría en toda la ciudad. A las fuertes heladas siguieron días de intensas lluvias; la ciudad estaba, por así decirlo, empapada de congoja. Se cerraron las puertas. Y aunque nueve décimas partes de los habitantes nunca las traspasaban, su cierre definitivo y absoluto desmoralizó a todos los corazones. Ya no se suministraba gas. Ratas, gatos y caballos de pura raza eran comidos, y se decía «no está mal». El asedio había dejado de ser una novedad. Los amigos ya no se invitaban unos a otros a una «comida de asedio» como a un picnic. Sofía, fatigada por el excesivo trabajo habitual, se acabó cansando de la situación. Estaba enojada con los prusianos por su tardanza y con los franceses por su inacción, y volcaba su *spleen* inglés sobre sus huéspedes. Éstos se decían unos a otros en secreto que la *patronne* se estaba volviendo formidable. Ante todo, guardaba rencor a los tenderos; en cierta ocasión en que, a consecuencia de los rumores de paz, los escaparates florecieron repentinamente con prodigiosas cantidades de toda clase de comestibles a los precios más elevados, probando así que la hambruna era provocada artificialmente, Sofía se puso furiosa. El señor Niepce en particular, aunque le vendía artículos con un descuento especial, padecía indignidades. Unos días después, aquel hombre bondadoso y paternal cometió un error lamentable al intentar introducir en su habitación a una linda muchacha que sabía ser cordial. Sofía, por una casualidad desgraciada para el comerciante, los pilló en el pasillo. Se puso fuera de sí, pero los únicos síntomas externos fueron una cara pálida y una voz fría y acerada que chirrió como una escofina en la susceptibilidad de los adeptos a Afrodita. ¡En esa época, Sofía se había convertido ciertamente en una tarasca, sin saberlo!

Ahora insistía a menudo en hablar del asedio y en oír todo lo que pudieran contarle los hombres. Sus comentarios, que hacía sin la menor consideración por la justificable delicadeza de los sentimientos de aquéllos como franceses, condujeron en ocasiones a acalorados intercambios. Cuando todo Montmartre y el Quartier Bréda se agitaron con la entrada del Treinta y Dos Batallón, se puso del lado del populacho y no quiso dar crédito a la solemne declaración de los periodistas, probada por documentos, de que aquellos maltratados soldados no eran cobardes en fuga. Apoyó a las mujeres que habían escupido a la cara a los del Treinta y Dos. Incluso dijo que, de haberlos visto, también ella les habría escupido. En realidad, estaba convencida de la inocencia del Treinta y Dos, pero algo le impedía admitirlo. La disputa concluyó con palabras duras entre Chirac y ella.

Al día siguiente, Chirac llegó a casa a una hora inhabitual, llamó a la puerta de la cocina y le dijo:

—Tengo que avisarla de que me marcho.

—¿Por qué? —preguntó con sequedad.

Estaba amasando harina y agua para hacer un pastel de patata. Sus pasteles de patata eran la alegría de la casa.

—¡Mi periódico ha cerrado! —respondió Chirac.

—¡Ah! —añadió ella, pensativa, pero sin mirarlo—. Ésa no es razón para que se marche.

—Sí —replicó él—. Esta casa está más allá de mis medios. No necesito decirle que, al dejar de aparecer, el periódico ha dejado sin pagar sus deudas. La casa me debe el salario de un mes. Así que tengo que marcharme.

—¡No! —exclamó Sofía— Puede pagarme cuando tenga dinero.

Él movió la cabeza.

—No tengo ninguna intención de aceptar su amabilidad.

—¿No tiene dinero? —inquirió ella bruscamente.

—Ni un céntimo —repuso Chirac—, Es el desastre: así de sencillo.

—Entonces tendrá que endeudarse de un modo u otro.

—¡Sí, pero no aquí! ¡No con usted!

—¡Verdaderamente, Chirac —exclamó Sofía, con voz zalamera—, no es usted razonable!

—¡Sin embargo, así es! —dijo él con determinación.

—¡Pues bien! —se volvió a él en actitud amenazadora—. ¡No será así! ¿Me entiende? Se quedará. Y me pagará cuando pueda. Si no, nos pelearemos. ¿Se imagina que voy a tolerar sus niñerías? Sólo porque se enfadara anoche...

—No es eso —protestó él—. Debería saber que no es por eso —ella lo sabía—. Es únicamente que no puedo permitirme...

—¡Basta! —exclamó en tono perentorio, deteniéndolo. Y después, más sosegadamente—: ¿Y Carlier? ¿Está también en las últimas?

—¡Ah! ¡Él tiene dinero! —suspiró Chirac, con triste envidia.

—Usted también lo tendrá algún día —concluyó ella—. Quédese por lo menos hasta Navidad o nos peleamos. ¿De acuerdo? —Su acento se había ablandado.

—¡Es usted demasiado buena! —cedió él—. No puedo pelearme con usted. Pero me duele aceptar...

—¡Oh! —le interrumpió la joven, cayendo en un modismo vulgar—, ya me está cargando con su estúpido orgullo. ¿Es eso lo que usted llama amistad? Ahora váyase. ¿Cómo quiere que me salga bien este pastel si se queda ahí plantado distrayéndome?

IV

Pero al cabo de tres días Chirac, con una suerte asombrosa, pasó a estar en otra situación, contratado por el *Journal des Débats.* Fueron los prusianos los que le encontraron un sitio. El célebre Payenneville, el segundo mayor *chroniqueur* de su época, se había resfriado mientras cumplía con sus deberes como guardia nacional y había muerto de neumonía. El tiempo había vuelto a empeorar; en Aubervilliers estaban muriendo soldados de congelación. El puesto de Payenneville fue ocupado por otro periodista, cuyo puesto ofrecieron a

Chirac. Le habló a Sofía de su buena fortuna con indisimulada vanidad.

—¡Usted y su sonrisa! —exclamó ella impaciente—¡No se le puede negar nada!

Se comportaba como si Chirac le diese asco. Lo humillaba. Pero con los demás huéspedes, sus aires de importancia como miembro de la redacción de los *Débats* eran cómicos de puro ingenuos. Aquel mismísimo día, Carlier dio aviso a Sofía de su marcha. Era relativamente rico, pero los hábitos que le permitían disfrutar de independencia en la incierta profesión del periodismo no le permitirían, mientras no ganaba nada, gastar un *sou* más de lo absolutamente necesario. Había decidido hacer causa común con una hermana viuda, que estaba acostumbrada a la frugalidad tal como se entiende ésta en Francia y vivía de las patatas y el vino que había acaparado.

—¿No te digo? ¡Me ha hecho perder un inquilino! —exclamó Sofía. E insistía, medio en broma medio en serio, en que Carlier se había ido porque no podía soportar el infantil engreimiento de Chirac. El piso estaba lleno de palabras cáusticas.

La mañana de Navidad, Chirac se quedó en la cama hasta muy tarde; aquel día no había periódicos. París parecía sumido en una especie de estupor. Hacia las once acudió a la puerta de la cocina.

—Tengo que hablar con usted —dijo. Su tono impresionó a Sofía.

—Entre —le conminó.

Él entró y cerró la puerta con aire de conspirador.

—Tenemos que tener una pequeña *fête*[54]. Usted y yo.

—¡Una *jete!* —repitió Sofía—, ¡Vaya una idea! ¿Cómo voy a salir?

Si la idea no hubiera resultado atractiva para los secretos de su corazón, removiendo deseos o recuerdos sobre los que el paso del tiempo había dejado una espesa capa de polvo, no habría empezado a sugerir dificultades; habría empezado por negarse en redondo.

—¡No importa! —dijo él enérgicamente—. Es Navidad y es preciso que tenga una charla con usted. No podemos hablar aquí. No he tenido una verdadera charla con usted desde que estuvo enferma. Vendrá conmigo a almorzar a un restaurante.

Ella se rió.

—¿Y el almuerzo de mis huéspedes?

—Se lo servirá un poco más temprano. Saldremos inmediatamente después y volveremos a tiempo para que prepare la cena. Es muy sencillo.

Ella movió la cabeza.

—Está usted loco —dijo, enojada.

—Es preciso que la invite —prosiguió él, frunciendo el ceño—. ¿Me comprende? Quiero que coma hoy conmigo. Lo exijo, y usted no va a negármelo.

Estaba muy cerca de ella en la pequeña cocina y hablaba con ferocidad, en tono intimidatorio, exactamente de la misma manera en que le había hablado ella cuando insistió en que debía vivir a crédito con ella durante un tiempo.

—Es usted muy descortés —eludió ella.

—Si soy descortés, me da lo mismo —resistió Chirac, inflexible—. Comerá conmigo; insisto en ello.

—¡No tengo ropa adecuada! —protestó la joven.

—Eso no me concierne. Resuélvalo como pueda.

Era la invitación a una comida navideña más curiosa que cabe imaginar.

A las doce y cuarto se lanzaron uno al lado del otro, muy abrigados, a las calles, sumidas en una profunda tristeza. El cielo, de color pizarra, presagiaba nieve. El aire era muy frío, y sin embargo húmedo. No

había *fiacres* en la placita de tres esquinas que forma la entrada de la Rue Clausel. En la Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, un solo ómnibus vacío subía a duras penas la empinada y resbaladiza cuesta, en la que los caballos patinaban y se recuperaban en respuesta al chasquido del látigo, que resonaba en las calles como en una bóveda vacía. Más arriba, en la Rue Fontaine, una de las pocas tiendas que estaban abiertas exhibía éste anuncio: *Gran selección de quesos para los regalos de Año Nuevo.* Se rieron.

—El año pasado, en estos momentos —dijo Chirac—, yo no pensaba más que en una cosa: el baile de máscaras de la Ópera. No pude dormir después. Este año no están abiertas ni las iglesias. ¿Y usted?

Sofía apretó los labios.

—No me lo pregunte —contestó.

Continuaron en silencio.

—¡Nosotros —dijo Chirac— estamos tristes, pero los prusianos, en sus trincheras, no pueden estar muy contentos tampoco! Sin duda echan de menos a sus familias y sus árboles de Navidad. ¡Riámonos!

La plaza Blanche y el bulevar de Clichy no estaban más animados que las calles y plazas menos importantes. No había vida en ninguna parte, apenas un sonido; ni siquiera el de los cañones. Nadie sabía nada; la Navidad había puesto a la ciudad en un lúgubre estado de desesperanza. Chirac tomó el brazo de Sofía al cruzar la plaza Blanche; pocos metros antes de la Rue Lepic se detuvo ante un pequeño restaurante, famoso entre los iniciados y conocido como «El Pequeño Louis». Entraron, bajando dos escalones, en un interior reducido y sombríamente pintoresco.

Sofía vio que los esperaban. Chirac había hecho sin duda una visita previa al restaurante por la mañana. Varias mesas desordenadas dejaban ver que ya había habido gente almorzando y se había marchado; pero en el rincón había una mesa para dos, recién puesta al mejor estilo de aquellos restaurantes, es decir, con un mantel a cuadros rojos y blancos y otras dos telas rojas y blancas, casi tan grandes como el mantel, plegadas a modo de servilletas y colocadas planas sobre dos gruesos platos, en medio de unos sólidos cubiertos de acero; un salero, del que se sacaba sal gema moliéndola con una manivela; un espolvoreador de pimienta, dos soportes para cubiertos y dos vasos corrientes. Los fenómenos que diferenciaban aquella mesa de una mesa vulgar eran una botella de champán y dos copas. El champán era uno de las pocos artículos que no habían aumentado de precio en el transcurso del sitio.

El dueño y su mujer estaban comiendo en otro rincón; era una pareja gorda y de aspecto abandonado a la que ninguna de las privaciones de un asedio podría haber consumido. El dueño se puso en pie. Vestía como un *chef,* todo de blanco, con el sagrado gorro, pero de un blanco lleno de manchas. Todo en aquel lugar carecía de pulcritud y arreglo y estaba más o menos sucio, excepto la mesa en la cual aguardaba el champán. Y, con todo, el restaurante era agradable, tranquilizador. El dueño saludaba a sus clientes como a unos amigos honrados. Su rostro grasiento era honrado, al igual que el de su mujer, pálido, cansado y humorístico. Chirac la saludó.

—Mire —le dijo ella desde la otra esquina, indicando un hueso que había en su plato—. ¡Es Diana!

—¡Ah! ¡Pobre animal! —exclamó Chirac.

—¿Qué quiere usted? —dijo la dueña del establecimiento —Costaba demasiado darle de comer. ¡Y era tan *mignonne*[55]! ¡No se podía soportar verla quedarse tan flaca!

—Estaba diciendo a mi mujer —terció el dueño —lo que le habría gustado ese hueso... ¡a Diana! — soltó una sonora carcajada.

Sofía y la dueña cambiaron una sonrisa curiosamente triste al oír aquel jocoso comentario, redescubierto por el dueño quizá por milésima vez desde el comienzo del asedio, pero que evidentemente consideraba del todo nuevo y original.

—¡Pues bien! —siguió diciendo confidencialmente a Chirac—. He encontrado algo muy bueno para usted: medio pato. —Y en voz todavía más baja—: Y no le costará demasiado.

Jamás se hacía en aquel restaurante ningún intento de obtener sino un modesto beneficio. Tenía una clientela habitual que conocía el valor del poco dinero que poseía y que también sabía apreciar una cocina franca y cabal. El dueño era el *chef* y como tal se refería siempre a él todo el mundo, hasta su mujer.

—¿Cómo lo ha conseguido? —preguntó Chirac.

—¡Ah! —repuso misteriosamente el dueño—. Tengo un amigo que es de Villeneuve St. Georges; un refugiado, ya sabe. En fin... —un gesto de sus gruesas manos sugirió que Chirac no debía preguntar demasiado.

—¡En efecto! —comentó Chirac—¡Pero es muy *chic,* eso!

—¡Ya lo creo que es *chic!* —añadió la dueña con energía.

—¡Es encantador! —murmuró Sofía cortésmente.

—¡Y luego, una ensaladita! —dijo el dueño.

—¡Pero eso..., eso todavía es más sorprendente! —intervino Chirac.

El dueño guiñó el ojo. Era bien sabido que existía un comercio gracias al cual había verduras frescas en el centro de una ciudad sitiada.

—¡Y luego, un quesito! —dijo Sofía imitando un poco el tono del dueño, sacando del interior de su abrigo un pequeño paquete redondo. Contenía un queso de Brie en muy buenas condiciones. Valía lo menos cincuenta francos y no le había costado ni dos. La dueña se unió a su marido en la inspección de aquella maravillosa joya. Sofía tomó un cuchillo y cortó un trozo para la mesa de la dueña.

—*¡Madame* es demasiado buena! —dijo ésta, confundida por aquella noble generosidad, y se llevó el regalo a su mesa como un foxterrier que buscara apresuradamente la soledad portando un suntuoso bocado. El dueño estaba radiante. Era como si en la acogedora atmósfera, íntima y natural, de aquel interior, la vasta y estupefacta melancolía de la ciudad pudiera quedar olvidada, perder su dominio.

Después, el dueño trajo un ladrillo caliente para los pies de *madame.* Era más por reconocimiento por el trozo de queso que por necesidad, pues el restaurante estaba bien caldeado; la diminuta cocina daba directamente a él y la puerta entre los dos estaba abierta; no había ventilación alguna.

—Es un amigo mío —explicó el dueño orgullosamente, dándose al cotilleo, mientras les servía una sopa difícil de describir—, un carnicero del Faubourg St Honoré, el que ha comprado los tres elefantes del Jardín des Plantes por veintisiete mil francos.

Todos mostraron sorpresa. El hombre descorchó el champán.

Al beber el primer sorbo (hacía mucho que había perdido su antigua aversión al vino), Sofía tuvo una vislumbre de sí misma en un espejo inclinado que estaba colgado, bastante alto, en la pared de enfrente. Hacía varios meses que no se había ataviado con ceremonia. Le agradó la repentina e inesperada visión de su elegancia y de su pálida belleza. Y el instantáneo efecto del champán fue renovar en su recuerdo una idea olvidada de las cosas buenas de la vida y los goces que durante tanto tiempo había echado de menos.

V

A las dos y media estaban solos en el saloncito del restaurante; vagamente, en sus espíritus soñadores y febriles, demasiado preocupados por dominar sin resquicio sus cuerpos tibios y relajados, flotaba la ilusión de que el restaurante les pertenecía y que estaban en casa. Ya no era un restaurante, sino un retiro donde cobijarse de una vida dura. El *chef* y su esposa dormitaban en un cuarto interior. El champán se había terminado; el rico queso también, y estaban bebiendo Marc de Borgoña. Estaban sentados en ángulo recto uno respecto al otro, con la mente meciéndose de acá para allá, poseídos de una buena disposición y una rápida cordialidad, y la carne satisfecha y sin embargo expectante. En una pausa de la conversación (que, enteramente banal y fragmentaria, había parecido llegar al colmo de lo agradable), Chirac puso la mano sobre la de Sofía, que descansaba lacia en la mesa, cubierta de restos. De modo casual, la mirada de Sofía se encontró con la de él, sin pretenderlo. Los dos se tornaron tímidos. El rostro delgado y barbado de Chirac tenía más que nunca aquella expresión nostálgica que siempre la inducía a suavizar para con él la inflexibilidad de su carácter. Tenía el aspecto de un niño. Para ella, Gerald había mostrado en ocasiones aquel mismo aspecto. Pero sin duda ella era ahora una de esas mujeres para las cuales todos los hombres, y sobre todo los que adoptan un talante de ternura, están investidos de una cierta e incurable cualidad infantil... No

había retirado la mano de inmediato, de forma que ya no podía retirarla.

Él la miró con tímida audacia. Los ojos de la joven estaban húmedos.

—¿En qué está pensando? —preguntó a Chirac.

—Me estaba preguntando qué debería haber hecho si se hubiera negado a venir.

—Y ¿qué *debería* haber hecho?

—Sin duda, algo terriblemente inconveniente —replicó él, dándose mucha importancia como un hombre que se mueve en el ámbito de la pura suposición. Se inclinó hacia ella.

—Queridísima amiga... —empezó en una voz diferente, tornándose más osado.

A ella le resultaba infinitamente dulce, voluptuosamente dulce, deleitarse de aquella manera en el calor de la tentación. Desde luego le pareció, entonces, el único placer auténtico que había en el mundo. Su cuerpo podría haber dicho a esto «¡mira cuán dispuesto estoy!». Su cuerpo podría haber dicho a esto «mira dentro de mi espíritu. Pues no tienes ningún pudor. Mira, y ve cuanto hay allí». Era como si el velo del convencionalismo hubiese sido desgarrado. Su mutua actitud era casi la de dos amantes entre los cuales una simple mirada puede estar cargada de secretos del pasado y promesas para el porvenir. Moralmente, ella era su amante en aquel momento.

Él le soltó la mano y le pasó el brazo alrededor de la cintura.

—Te amo —musitó, con gran emoción.

El rostro de Sofía cambió y se endureció.

—No debe hacer eso —le dijo con frialdad, aspereza e irritación. Frunció el ceño. No quiso borrar ni una arruga de su frente por la súplica de la sorprendida mirada de Chirac. Sin embargo, no quería rechazarlo. El instinto que la hacía rechazarlo no estaba bajo su dominio. Igual que un hambriento que rechaza obstinadamente una invitación que está anhelante por aceptar, ella, aunque no por timidez, se sentía obligada a rechazar a Chirac. Tal vez si sus deseos no se hubieran visto forzados a permanecer latentes por un exceso de esfuerzo físico y de tensión nerviosa, las consecuencias hubieran sido diferentes.

Chirac, como la mayoría de los hombres que han hallado débil una vez a una mujer, se imaginaba que entendía a fondo a las mujeres. Pensaba en las mujeres como los occidentales piensan en los chinos, como una raza aparte, misteriosa pero susceptible de ser comprendida de una manera infalible mediante la aplicación de unos cuantos principios rectores de psicología. Además, hablaba en serio y con franqueza. Prosiguió, obedeciendo respetuosamente y retirando el brazo:

—Queridísima amiga —la exhortó con impertérrita confianza—, sin duda sabe que la amo.

Ella movió la cabeza con impaciencia, sin dejar de preguntarse qué era lo que la impedía arrojarse en sus brazos. Sabía que lo estaba tratando mal con aquel brusco cambio de frente; pero no podía evitarlo. Entonces empezó a sentir pena por él.

—Hemos sido muy buenos amigos —dijo él—. Siempre la he admirado enormemente. No creía que fuera a atreverme a amarla hasta aquel día en que oí cómo ese viejo villano de Niepce hacía sus avances. Entonces, cuando me di cuenta de lo celoso que estaba, supe que la amaba. Desde entonces no he pensado más que en usted. ¡Le juro que, si no me pertenece, todo habrá terminado para mí! ¡Todo! ¡Nunca he visto a una mujer como usted! ¡Tan fuerte, tan orgullosa, tan amable y tan bella! ¡Es usted asombrosa, sí, asombrosa! Ninguna otra mujer podría haber salido de una situación imposible como ha hecho usted desde la desaparición de su esposo. Para mí es usted una mujer única. Soy muy sincero. Además, ya lo sabe... ¡Querida amiga!

Ella negó con la cabeza apasionadamente. No le amaba. Pero estaba conmovida. Y deseaba amarle. Deseaba ceder a él, aunque sólo le agradara, y amarle después. Pero ese obstinado instinto la frenaba.

—No digo ahora —continuó Chirac—, Déjeme tener esperanza.

La teatralidad latina de sus gestos y su tono acentuó la pena que inspiraba a Sofía.

—¡Mi pobre Chirac! —murmuró en tono de lástima, y empezó a ponerse los guantes.

—¡Esperaré! —persistía él.

Sofía frunció los labios. Él la agarró arrebatadamente por la cintura. Ella apartó el rostro del suyo, con firmeza. Ahora no mostraba dureza ni enojo. Desconcertado por su compasión, la soltó.

—¡Mi pobre Chirac! —repitió ella— No debería haber venido. Tengo que irme. Es completamente inútil. Créame.

—¡No, no! —susurró él con violencia.

Ella se puso en pie y el brusco movimiento empujó la mesa, que se deslizó chirriando por el suelo. El palpitante hechizo de la carne se rompió y la escena llegó a su fin. El dueño, despertado de su duermevela, entró dando traspiés. Chirac no tuvo otra cosa que la cuenta como recompensa por sus sufrimientos. Estaba desconcertado.

Salieron del restaurante, en silencio, con aire estúpido.

En las fúnebres calles estaba oscureciendo; los faroleros encendían las míseras lámparas de aceite que habían reemplazado al gas. No había nadie en la calle más que ellos, los faroleros y el ómnibus. La penumbra era sobrecogedora, desoladora. El silencio general semejaba el silencio de la desesperación. Acongojada, Sofía pensó en el problema irresoluble de la existencia. ¡Pues le parecía que ella y Chirac habían creado aquella congoja de la nada y sin embargo era una congoja incurable!

Capítulo VII

EL TRIUNFO

I

Sofía estaba una noche, acostada y despierta, en la habitación que recientemente había dejado Carlier. Aquella callada negación de la personalidad había llegado y se había ido, y apenas había dejado constancia de sí en la habitación ni en la memoria de quienes rodeaban su existencia en la casa. Sofía había decidido bajar del sexto piso, en parte porque la tentación de disponer de una buena habitación, después de meses en un cubículo, era muy fuerte; pero más porque últimamente se había visto obligada a levantar una barricada ante la puerta del cubículo con una cómoda, debido a las propensiones de un nuevo inquilino del sexto. No servía de nada quejarse al portero; el único argumento eficaz era la cómoda, y aun ésta era más frágil de lo que Sofía hubiera deseado. De aquí su final retirada.

Oyó que se abría la puerta del piso; luego se cerró con una violencia nerviosa. El golpe habría despertado con toda seguridad a durmientes menos consumados que el señor Niepce y su amigo, cuyos ronquidos prosiguieron con regularidad no perturbada. Tras una pausa en la que no hubo otra cosa que un arrastrar de pies, se oyó raspar una cerilla y los pasos recorrieron el pasillo con las precauciones más exageradas contra el ruido. Después siguió otro portazo inintencionado. Era, decididamente, la entrada de un hombre que carecía de la menor aptitud natural para las irrupciones furtivas. El reloj de la habitación del señor Niepce, al que el tendero había convencido de que marcara la hora exacta, dio las tres con su delicado tintineo.

Durante varios días, Chirac había estado misteriosamente ocupado hasta muy tarde en las oficinas de los *Débats*. Nadie sabía a qué se dedicaba; no dijo nada, excepto para informar a Sofía de que seguiría llegando a casa hacia las tres de la madrugada hasta nuevo aviso. Ella había insistido en dejarle en su habitación los materiales y utensilios para una ligera colación. Naturalmente, él había protestado, con la irracional obstinación de un hombre físicamente débil que se aferra a ella para poder desafiar a las leyes de la naturaleza. Pero había protestado en vano.

En general, su conducta desde el día de Navidad tenía asustada a Sofía, a pesar de su tendencia a ahogar las alarmas fáciles nada más nacer. Él no comía casi nada y andaba de un lado a otro con la cara de un hombre que se muere por culpa de un corazón destrozado. El cambio que había sufrido era desde luego trágico. Y en vez de mejorar empeoraba. «¿He hecho yo esto?», se preguntaba Sofía. «¡Es imposible que lo haya hecho yo! ¡Es absurdo y ridículo que se comporte así!». Sus pensamientos se inclinaban alternativamente a simpatizar con él y a despreciarlo, a culparse a sí misma y a culparlo a él. Cuando hablaban, lo hacían con torpeza, como si uno de ellos o los dos hubieran cometido un crimen vergonzoso que ni siquiera podía ser mencionado. La atmósfera del piso estaba mancillada por el horror. Y Sofía no podía ofrecerle un tazón de sopa sin preguntarse si la miraría o evitaría mirarla y sin preparar de antemano y cuidadosamente sus propios gestos y palabras. La existencia era una pesadilla de falta de espontaneidad.

—¡Por lo menos han puesto al descubierto sus baterías! —había exclamado él con dolorosa jocosidad dos días después de Navidad, cuando los sitiadores reemprendieron el cañoneo. Trataba de imitar el extraño alborozo general de la ciudad, que se había visto sacudida de su apatía por la repetición de un ruido familiar, pero el esfuerzo fue un fracaso deplorable. Y Sofía no solamente condenó el fracaso de la imitación de Chirac sino también la cosa imitada. «¡Qué infantil!», pensó. No obstante, por mucho que despreciara lo endeble del comportamiento de Chirac, se sentía profundamente impresionada, auténticamente sorprendida, por la gravedad y persistencia de sus síntomas. «Sin duda está nervioso por mi causa desde hace mucho tiempo», pensó. «¡Está claro que no se ha podido volver tan loco en un día o dos! Pero yo nunca me di cuenta de nada. ¡No; sinceramente, nunca me di cuenta de nada!». Y lo mismo que su conducta en el restaurante había trastornado la seguridad de Chirac en su conocimiento del otro sexo, ahora el singular comportamiento de Chirac trastornaba la suya. Estaba desconcertada. Estaba asustada, aunque lo disimulaba.

Había revivido una y otra vez la escena en el restaurante. Se preguntaba una y otra vez si en realidad no se esperaba de antemano que la cortejase en el restaurante. No podía determinar con precisión cuándo había empezado a esperarse una declaración, pero probablemente mucho antes de que hubiese terminado la comida. Lo había previsto y podía haberlo impedido. Pero no había tomado la decisión de impedirlo. La

curiosidad, no sólo respecto a él sino también a ella misma, la había tentado tácitamente a alentarlo. Se preguntaba una y otra vez por qué lo había rechazado. Le resultaba sorprendente que lo hubiera hecho. ¿Fue porque era una mujer casada? ¿Fue porque tenía escrúpulos morales? ¿Fue, en el fondo, porque no le gustaba? ¿Fue porque su ferviente manera de cortejarla había ofendido su flema inglesa? Y la paciencia que mostraba al no renovar el ataque ¿le agradaba o le desagradaba? No podía responder. No lo sabía.

Pero siempre supo que deseaba amor. Sólo que ella concebía una clase diferente de amor: plácido, regular, un tanto severo, que estuviera por encima del plano de caprichos, venas, caricias y todo contacto meramente camal. No es que considerara que despreciaba estas cosas (aunque así era). Lo que deseaba era un amor que fuese demasiado orgulloso, demasiado independiente para exhibir con franqueza su alegría o su dolor. Aborrecía toda exhibición de sentimiento. Y aun en los más íntimos abandonos habría tenido reservas y habría esperado reservas, confiando en la capacidad de adivinación de un amante y en la suya propia. El fundamento de su carácter era una altiva independencia moral, y esta cualidad era lo que más admiraba en los demás.

La incapacidad de Chirac para sacar de su propio orgullo fuerzas para sostenerse ante el golpe del rechazo de Sofía fue matando en ella, poco a poco, el deseo sexual que él había despertado y que durante unos días titiló estimulado por el capricho y el arrepentimiento. Sofía vio de forma cada vez más clara que su instinto irracional había tenido razón al decir que no. Y cuando, a pesar de esto, volvía a sentir arrepentimiento, se consolaba pensando: «No puedo dejar que esta clase de cosas me preocupe. No vale la pena. ¿A qué conduce? ¿No es la vida bastante complicada ya sin eso? ¡No, no! Me quedaré como estoy. ¡De todos modos sé lo que saco tal como están las cosas!». Y reflexionaba acerca de su prometedora situación económica y de la perspectiva de unos ingresos suficientes y constantes. Y entonces se apoderaba de ella un ligero estremecimiento de impaciencia por la interminable y gigantesca estupidez del asedio.

Pero su falta de espontaneidad en presencia de Chirac no disminuía.

Allí acostada aguardaba los acostumbrados ruidos que significarían que Chirac se había retirado por fin a dormir. Sus oídos, sin embargo, no captaron ninguno que proviniera de su habitación. Después se imaginó que olía a quemado en el piso. Se incorporó y olfateó ansiosamente, de improviso totalmente despierta y aprensiva. Entonces tuvo la seguridad de que el olor no estaba en su imaginación. La estancia estaba sumida en completa oscuridad. Febril, buscó a tientas con la mano derecha las cerillas en la mesilla de noche y tiró al suelo vela y cerillas. Echó mano a su bata, que estaba extendida sobre la cama, se la puso y se dirigió hacia la puerta. Iba descalza. Encontró la puerta. En el pasillo no pudo distinguir nada al principio, pero luego vio una delgada línea luminosa que indicaba la parte inferior de la puerta de Chirac. El olor a quemado era fuerte e inconfundible. Fue hacia la tenue luz, tanteó en busca del tirador con la palma de la mano y abrió. No se le ocurrió llamar en voz alta y preguntar qué ocurría.

La casa no se había incendiado, pero hubiera podido ser así. Sofía había dejado, en la mesa que había a los pies de la cama de Chirac, una lamparilla para cocinar y una cazuela de caldo. Lo único que tenía que hacer Chirac era encender la lamparilla y poner la cazuela sobre ella. Había encendido la lamparilla, después de levantar las dobles mechas, y se había dejado caer, tal como estaba, en la silla que estaba junto a la mesa; se había quedado dormido con la cabeza apoyada de lado en la mesa. No había colocado la cazuela sobre la lamparilla ni bajado las mechas, y las llamas, coronadas por un espeso humo negro, ondulaban de acá para allá a pocos centímetros de su flotante cabello. El sombrero del joven había rodado por el suelo; aún llevaba puesto el amplio abrigo y un guante de lana; el otro había hallado acomodo en la rodilla. También ardía una vela.

Sofía se acercó apresuradamente, casi se podría decir que subrepticiamente, y bajó las mechas de la lamparilla. Sobre la mesa cayó una nube de motas negras; por suerte la cazuela estaba tapada; de lo contrario el caldo se habría echado a perder.

Chirac presentaba un espectáculo desgarrador y Sofía fue consciente de la profunda y dolorosa emoción que le produjo verlo así. Tenía que estar absolutamente agotado y quebrantado por la falta de sueño. Era un hombre incapaz de tener un horario regular, incapaz de tratar a su cuerpo como es debido. Aunque se acostaba a las tres de la mañana se seguía levantando a su hora habitual. Parecía un muerto, pero más triste, más nostálgico. Fuera, en la calle, reinaba la niebla, y en su fina barba mojada brillaban gotitas de humedad. Su actitud tenía la inconsiderada y violenta postración de un perro extenuado. El animal apaleado que había en él se expresaba en cada detalle de aquella postura. Se dejaba ver incluso en sus párpados blancos y demacrados y en la caída de un dedo. Su rostro mostraba gran tristeza. Inspiraba compasión como la inspira siempre el rostro desguarnecido del sueño; estaba así de indefenso, de expuesto; era así de sencillo. Hizo pensar a Sofía en los misterios internos de la vida, recordándole en cierto modo que la humanidad camina siempre sobre una delgada costra por encima de abismos aterradores. No se estremeció físicamente, pero su alma tembló.

Mecánicamente puso la cazuela sobre la lamparilla y el ruido despertó a Chirac, que gimió. Al principio no reparó en su presencia. Cuando vio que había alguien que se inclinaba sobre él no se dio cuenta inmediatamente de quién era. Se frotó los ojos con los puños, igual que un niño, y se enderezó, haciendo crujir la silla.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó—. ¡Oh, *madame!* Le pido perdón. ¿Qué ha pasado?

—Ha estado a punto de destruir la casa —dijo ella—. Olí humo y entré. Llegué justo a tiempo. Ya no hay peligro. Pero, por favor, tenga cuidado—. Hizo ademán de dirigirse a la puerta.

—Pero ¿qué fue lo que hice? —inquirió él, con un temblor en los párpados.

Sofía se lo explicó.

Él se levantó de la silla, vacilante. La joven le dijo que se volviera a sentar y él obedeció como en sueños.

—Ahora ya puedo irme —dijo ella.

—Aguarde un momento —murmuró Chirac—, Le ruego que me perdone. No sabría cómo agradecérselo. De verdad es usted muy buena. ¿Quiere aguardar un momento?

Hablaba en tono de súplica. La miró, un poco deslumbrado por la luz y por ella. La lamparilla y la vela iluminaban teatralmente la parte inferior de su rostro y mostraban la textura de su *peignoir* de franela azul; el dibujo de una parte de cuello de encaje se recortaba en sombra contra su mejilla. Su rostro estaba cubierto de rubor y llevaba el cabello suelto. Era evidente que Chirac no conseguía recuperarse de la justificable sorpresa que le había producido la aparición de aquella figura en su habitación.

—¿Qué pasa... ahora? —dijo ella. El ligero y socarrón énfasis que puso en la palabra «ahora» indicaba lo que había en lo más profundo de su pensamiento. La manera en que lo había visto la había emocionado y la había llenado de simpatía mujeril. Pero aquella simpatía no era más que la envoltura de su desdén hacia él. No podía admirar la debilidad. No podía sino sentir piedad por ella, una piedad en la que se mezclaba el desprecio. Instintivamente lo trataba como a un niño. Le había faltado dignidad humana. Y a Sofía le pareció que antes no estaba totalmente segura de si podía amarlo pero que ahora sí lo estaba. Se encontraba cerca de él. Veía las heridas de un alma que no era capaz de ocultarlas y aquella visión le resultaba molesta. Era dura. No hacía concesiones. Y se deleitaba en su dureza. ¡El desprecio —un desprecio bondadoso, amable, indulgente—, ése era el fondo de la simpatía que la hacía parecer cálida exteriormente! ¡Desprecio por la falta de dominio de sí mismo que había tenido como consecuencia la rápida degeneración de un hombre, convirtiéndolo en una víctima torturada! ¡Desprecio por la falta de perspectiva que agrandaba un simple hongo hasta que llenaba todo el campo de la vida! ¡Desprecio por aquella femenina esclavitud al sentimiento! Pensó que quizá hubiera podido entregarse a Chirac como se da un juguete a un niño. ¡Pero amarlo...! ¡No! Era consciente de su inconmensurable superioridad respecto de él, pues lo era de la libertad de un alma fuerte.

—Quería decirle —prosiguió él —que me marcho.

—¿Adonde? —preguntó ella.

—Fuera de París.

—¿Fuera de París? ¿Cómo?

—¡En globo! Mi periódico... Es un asunto de gran importancia. Ya me entiende. Me he ofrecido. ¿Qué le voy a hacer?

—¡Es peligroso! —observó Sofía, esperando a ver si adoptaba el aire necio de alguien que no comprende el miedo.

—¡Oh! —murmuró el pobre hombre con entonación fatua y chascando los dedos—. Eso me da lo mismo. Sí, es peligroso. ¡Sí, es peligroso! —repitió—¿Pero qué le voy a hacer? ¡Para mí...!

Ella pensó que ojalá no hubiese mencionado el peligro. Le ofendió verlo provocar su irónico desdén.

—Será pasado mañana por la noche —dijo Chirac—, En el patio de la Estación del Norte. Quiero que venga a verme partir. Tengo gran deseo de que venga a verme partir. Le he pedido a Carlier que la acompañe.

Lo mismo podría haber dicho: «Me ofrezco al martirio y usted tiene que asistir al espectáculo».

Ella lo despreció todavía más.

—¡Oh! ¡Esté tranquila! No seré una molestia para usted. Nunca más volveré a hablarle de mi amor. La conozco. Sé que sería inútil. Pero espero que venga a desearme *bon voyage*.

—Por supuesto, si realmente lo desea —respondió ella con animada frialdad.

Él tomó su mano y la besó.

Antaño le complacía que le besara la mano. Pero ahora no le agradó. Le pareció una cosa histérica y estúpida. Sentía que los pies se le helaban en el suelo.

—Ahora le dejo —se despidió—. Por favor, tómese la sopa.

Huyó, esperando que no le mirase los pies.

II

El patio de la Estación de Ferrocarril del Norte estaba iluminado con lámparas de aceite tomadas de las locomotoras; sus reflectores plateados proyectaban rayos deslumbrantes desde todos los lados sobre la parte inferior de la inmensa masa amarilla del globo; la parte superior se mecía con desmaño de gigante en la fuerte brisa. No era más que un globo pequeño, en proporción con lo que son los globos, pero parecía monstruoso balanceándose sobre las figuras humanas que se agitaban por debajo de él. El cordaje se perfilaba contra el tafetán amarillo a la altura del máximo diámetro del globo, pero más allá todo era vago, y ni siquiera los espectadores situados a gran distancia podrían distinguir claramente lo alto de la gran esfera del cielo oscuro y agitado. La barquilla, sujeta por cuerdas atadas a estacas, se elevaba de vez en cuando a unos pocos centímetros del suelo. La sombría y severa arquitectura de los edificios de la estación rodeaba el globo por todas partes; sólo tenía una manera de escapar. Por encima de los tejados de aquellos edificios, que no dejaban entrar los ruidos de la ciudad, se percibía el estruendo irregular del bombardeo. Caían proyectiles en los barrios meridionales de París, tal vez sin causar grandes daños, pero precipitándose de vez en cuando en el interior de una casa y dejándola hecha un triste desastre. Los parisienses estaban convencidos de que los proyectiles estaban maliciosamente dirigidos contra hospitales y museos; cuando por casualidad un niño era hecho pedazos, sus comentarios tácitos sobre el salvajismo prusiano eran acerbos. Sus caras decían: «¡Esos bárbaros no perdonan ni siquiera a nuestros hijos!». Se divertían creando un mercado de proyectiles, en el que se pagaba más caro uno vivo que uno muerto y se modificaba la tarifa según existencias. Y, como el mercado del ganado estaba vacío, el de las verduras estaba vacío y ya no había animales pastando en la hierba de los parques, y los veinticinco millones de ratas de la metrópolis eran demasiados para suscitar el interés de los espectadores, y la Bolsa estaba casi desierta, el tráfico de proyectiles sostuvo el famélico instinto mercantil en una época muy aburrida. Pero el efecto sobre los nervios era dañino. Los nervios de todos semejaban una herida en carne viva. De la risa brotaba, como por arte de magia, un enojo virulento; de las caricias, golpes. Esta consecuencia indirecta de los bombardeos era especialmente llamativa en el grupo de hombres que se encontraba bajo el globo. Cada uno se comportaba como si estuviera dominando su temperamento en las condiciones más difíciles. No cesaban de mirar al cielo, aunque no se distinguía nada salvo el borde borroso de una nube pasajera. Pero el estruendo provenía de aquel cielo; los proyectiles que caían sobre Montrouge salían de aquel cielo, y el globo iba a subir a él, iba a ascender a sus misterios, a desafiar sus peligros, a deslizarse sobre el circundante anillo de fuego y salvajes.

Sofía se mantuvo apartada con Carlier. Éste le había indicado un lugar concreto, al abrigo de la columnata, donde dijo que era obligado que se apostaran. Tras haber guiado a Sofía hasta aquel lugar y haberle recalcado que no debían moverse de allí, pareció considerar que su cometido había terminado y no dijo una palabra. Con el sombrero de seda, de copa muy alta, que siempre llevaba, y un delgado abrigo pasado de moda, con el cuello levantado, ofrecía una figura notablemente grotesca. Por fortuna la noche no era muy fría; de lo contrario habría muerto pasivamente congelado al lado de aquel grupo febril. Al poco rato, Sofía ya no hizo caso de él. No apartaba la vista del globo. Un hombre de edad, de aspecto aristocrático, estaba apoyado en la barquilla con el reloj en la mano; a intervalos fruncía el ceño o golpeaba el pie con el suelo. Un marinero veterano, fumando tranquilamente una pipa, daba vueltas y más vueltas alrededor del globo, con la mirada clavada en él; en una ocasión subió al cordaje y en otra saltó al interior de la barquilla y, furioso, echó fuera un saco que alguien había metido en ella. Pero casi siempre estaba tranquilo. Otras personas de autoridad se movían por allí apresuradamente, hablando y gesticulando; unos cuantos obreros aguardaban

órdenes, ociosos.

—¿Dónde está Chirac? —exclamó de repente el anciano del reloj.

Varias voces respondieron en tono deferente; un hombre se fue corriendo y desapareció en las tinieblas, llevando el recado.

Luego apareció Chirac, nervioso, tímido, agitado. Estaba envuelto en un abrigo de piel que Sofía no había visto nunca; en la mano llevaba una jaula que contenía seis palomas cuya blancura se removía inquieta en su interior. El marinero le cogió la jaula y todas las autoridades se congregaron a su alrededor para inspeccionar los maravillosos pájaros, de los que al parecer dependían asuntos de gran trascendencia. Cuando el grupo se disgregó, se vio al marinero inclinándose sobre el borde de la barquilla para depositar dentro la jaula sana y salva. Después entró en la barquilla, todavía fumando su pipa, y se encaramó con aire despreocupado a la pared de mimbre. El hombre del reloj estaba conversando con Chirac, que hacía frecuentes gestos de asentimiento y parecía estar diciendo sin cesar: «¡Sí, señor! ¡Perfectamente, señor! ¡Entiendo, señor! ¡Sí señor!».

De improviso, Chirac se volvió hacia la barquilla y preguntó algo al marinero, que movió la cabeza, tras lo cual hizo un gesto de sumisa desesperación al hombre del reloj. Y en un instante la muchedumbre fue presa de la excitación.

—¡Los víveres! —gritó el hombre del reloj—¡Los víveres, en el nombre de Dios! ¡Hace falta ser idiota para olvidarse de los víveres! ¡En el nombre de Dios..., de Dios!

A Sofía le arrancaron una sonrisa aquellos apuros y la ineficaz dirección, que no había pensado en la comida; pues al parecer no era sólo que se hubieran olvidado de ella; era una cuestión que ni siquiera se había tenido en cuenta. No pudo evitar sentir desdén por toda aquella multitud de varones presumidos y ajetreados, a los que no se les había ocurrido que también los aeróstatas tienen que comer. Y se preguntó si se habría hecho todo así. Tras una demora que pareció muy larga se resolvió el problema de los víveres, principalmente, hasta donde pudo juzgar Sofía, a base de pasteles de chocolate y botellas de vino.

—¡Ya basta! ¡Ya basta! —gritó Chirac varias veces con pasión a un puñado de hombres que empezaron a discutir con él.

Después echó una mirada furtiva en torno suyo e, inflando el pecho y dando palmaditas en su abrigo de piel, fue directamente hacia Sofía. Era evidente que el lugar en el que situaron a la joven había sido acordado de antemano entre él y Carlier. ¡Pudieron olvidar la comida, pero pudieron pensar dónde situar a Sofía!

Todos los ojos lo siguieron. Aquellos ojos no podían, en la penumbra, distinguir la belleza de Sofía, pero sí vieron que era joven, esbelta y elegante, y de porte extranjero. Aquello era suficiente. El aire mismo pareció vibrar con la intensa curiosidad de aquellos ojos. Y de inmediato Chirac se convirtió en el héroe de una brillante y romántica aventura. De inmediato fue envidiado y admirado por todos los hombres de autoridad presentes. ¿Qué era ella? ¿Quién era? ¿Era una pasión seria o un simple capricho? ¿Se había echado en sus brazos? Era innegable que las criaturas encantadoras se echaban a veces en brazos de afortunadas mediocridades. ¿Era una mujer casada? ¿Una muchacha? Aquellos interrogantes palpitaban debajo de los abrigos; mientras tanto, se observaba estrictamente la corrección de una conducta ceremoniosa.

Chirac se descubrió y le besó la mano. El viento desarregló su cabello. Ella vio que estaba muy pálido y preocupado bajo la arrogancia originada en un sincero deseo de ser valiente.

—¡Bien; ha llegado el momento! —dijo él.

—¿Se olvidaron todos ustedes de la comida? —preguntó Sofía.

Él se encogió de hombros.

—¿Qué le vamos a hacer? No se puede pensar en todo.

—Espero que tenga buen viaje —deseó ella.

Ya se había despedido de él antes, en casa, y había sido informada de todo lo concerniente al globo, al marinero-aeronauta y a los preparativos; ya no tenía nada que decir, nada en absoluto.

Chirac se encogió nuevamente de hombros.

—¡Así lo espero! —murmuró, pero en un tono que expresaba que no tenía tal confianza.

—¿No es demasiado fuerte el viento? —sugirió ella.

Una vez más, él se encogió de hombros.

—¿Qué le vamos a hacer?

—¿Va en la dirección que usted quiere?

—Sí, casi —admitió de mala gana. Luego, enardeciéndose—: Bien, *madame*. Ha sido usted extremadamente amable en venir. Era muy importante para mí que viniera. Es por su causa por lo que me marcho de París.

Ella mostró su disgusto frunciendo el ceño.

—¡Ah! —le imploró él en un susurro—. No haga eso. Siga sonriéndome. Al fin y al cabo, no es culpa mía. Recuerde que ésta puede ser la última vez que la vea, la última vez que contemplo sus ojos.

Sofía sonrió. Estaba convencida de la sinceridad de la emoción que se expresaba en toda aquella aparatosa conducta. Y tuvo que tratar de justificarse a sí misma por Chirac. Le sonrió para complacerle. Tal vez su inflexible sentido común lo desdeñaba, pero indudablemente era el centro de un episodio romántico. ¡El globo meciéndose en la oscuridad! ¡Los hombres aguardando! ¡La misión secreta! ¡Y Chirac, con la cabeza descubierta al viento que iba a llevárselo, diciéndole con acentos fatalistas que su imagen había devastado su vida, mientras los envidiosos aspirantes contemplaban su coloquio! Sí, era romántico. ¡Y qué hermosa era! Su belleza era una realidad activa que recorría el mundo haciendo jugarretas a pesar de ella misma. Los pensamientos que acudieron a su mente eran los amplios y espléndidos pensamientos del romance. ¡Y era Chirac quien los había suscitado! Existía un drama real, pues, que triunfaba sobre los absurdos y las nimiedades accidentales de la situación. Las últimas palabras que dirigió a Chirac fueron tiernas y alentadoras.

Él volvió apresuradamente al globo, poniéndose de nuevo el sombrero. Fue recibido con el respeto debido al que acaba de hacer una conquista. Era sagrado. Sofía se reunió con Carlier, que se había apartado, y empezó a hablarle gárrulamente, sin un adarme de espontaneidad. Hablaba sin ton ni son y casi sin darse cuenta de lo que decía. Chirac había sido arrebatado ya de su vida, como lo habían sido otros seres, tantos ya. Pensó en sus primeros encuentros, en la simpatía que siempre los había unido. Ahora, él había perdido su sencillez en la crisis de su destino, que se había originado a sí misma, y había bajado en la estimación de Sofía. Y estaba decidida a que le agradara más precisamente por haber bajado en su estimación. Se preguntó si en realidad había emprendido aquella aventura por una desilusión sentimental. Se preguntó si, de no haberse olvidado una noche de dar cuerda a su reloj, habrían seguido viviendo tranquilamente bajo el mismo techo en la Rue Bréda.

El marinero subió definitivamente a la barquilla; se había envuelto en un amplio abrigo. Había pasado Chirac una pierna por el borde y se habían dispuesto ocho hombres junto a las cuerdas cuando resonaron los cascos de un caballo por la entrada vigilada del patio, en medio de un tumulto de repentina excitación. El reluciente pecho del caballo estaba moteado de la clásica espuma.

—¡Un telegrama del gobernador de París!

Cuando el enviado, refrenando su montura, se aproximó al grupo, hasta el anciano del reloj se levantó el sombrero. El enviado correspondió, se inclinó para preguntar algo que Chirac contestó y después, con otro intercambio de saludos, el telegrama oficial fue entregado a Chirac e hicieron retroceder al caballo apartándolo de la muchedumbre. Era muy emocionante. Carlier estaba encantado.

—Nunca va demasiado acelerado, el gobernador. ¡Es una cualidad!, exclamó Carlier con ironía.

Chirac entró en la barquilla. Y luego el anciano del reloj sacó una bolsa negra de las sombras qué había detrás de él y la confió a Chirac, que la tomó con gran respeto y la ocultó. El marinero empezó a dar órdenes. Los hombres de las cuerdas estaban ahora agachados. De repente el globo se elevó cosa de treinta centímetros y se estremeció. El marinero seguía dando voces. Todas las autoridades contemplaban inmóviles el globo. Aquel momento de suspense era eterno.

—¡Soltad todo! —ordenó el marinero, en pie y aferrando las cuerdas. Chirac estaba sentado en la barquilla, una masa de piel oscura con una pequeña mancha blanca. Los hombres de las cuerdas eran un puñado de confusas figuras forcejeantes.

Un lado de la barquilla se inclinó y el marinero casi se vio arrojado fuera. Tres hombres del otro lado no habían conseguido liberar las cuerdas.

—¡Soltad, cadáveres! —les chilló el marinero.

El globo dio un brinco, como si hubiese tirado de él algún tremendo impulso desde los cielos.

—*Adieu!* —gritó Chirac, quitándose la gorra y agitándola—. *Adieu!*

—*Bon voyage! Bon voy age!* —vitoreó la pequeña multitud. Y luego—: *Vive la France!* —Todos tenían un nudo en la garganta, y también Sofía.

Pero la parte superior del globo se había chafado hacia un lado, destruyendo su forma de pera, y toda su masa se desvió violentamente hacia el muro de la estación, oscilando debajo la barquilla, como un juguete, y un ancla debajo de ella. Hubo un clamor de alarma. Luego la gran bola brincó de nuevo y pasó por encima del alto tejado de cristal, escapando de un pinchazo por pulgadas. Los vítores callaron al instante... El globo había desaparecido. Se había desvanecido como por obra de una fuerza poderosa y feroz que se hubiese impacientado esperándolo. Por unos segundos permaneció en la retina colectiva de los espectadores la visión de la inclinada barquilla meciéndose cerca de los tejados como la cola de una cometa. ¡Y después, nada! ¡Negrura! ¡Negrura! Era ya imposible ver el globo en el vasto y tempestuoso océano de la noche, juguete de los vientos. Los espectadores empezaron una vez más a percibir el estruendo de los cañones. Tal vez el globo volaba ya sin ser visto en medio de las ruinas, por encima de aquellos cañones.

Sofía contuvo involuntariamente el aliento. Una gélida sensación de soledad, de inanidad, entumecía su ser.

Nadie volvió a ver jamás a Chirac ni al veterano marinero. Debió de tragárselos el mar. De los sesenta y cinco globos que salieron de París durante el sitio, de dos nunca más se supo. Éste fue el primero de los dos. Sea como fuere, Chirac no había exagerado el peligro, aunque sin duda ésa había sido su intención.

III

Éste fue el fin de las aventuras románticas de Sofía en Francia. Poco después, los alemanes entraron en París, por mutuo acuerdo, y pusieron gran empeño en ver el Louvre, y se marcharon, en medio del silencio de la ciudad. Para Sofía, la conclusión del asedio significó sobre todo que los precios bajaron. Mucho antes de que pudieran llegar a París suministros del exterior, los escaparates se llenaron repentinamente de artículos llegados sólo los tenderos sabían de dónde. Sofía, con sus reservas del sótano, podría haber resistido varias semanas más y la enojaba no haber vendido más cantidad de sus excelentes mercancías cuando éstas valían oro. La firma de un tratado en Versalles redujo el valor de los dos jamones que le quedaban, que pesaban unas cinco libras cada uno, al precio habitual de los jamones. Sin embargo, a finales de enero se hallaba en posesión de un capital de unos ocho mil francos, todos los muebles del piso y una buena reputación. Ella se lo había ganado todo. Nada podía destruir la estructura de su belleza, pero parecía gastada y apreciablemente mayor. Muchas veces se preguntaba cuándo regresaría Chirac. Podría haber escrito a Carlier o al periódico, pero no lo hizo. Fue Niepce el que descubrió por un periódico que el globo de Chirac se había extraviado. De momento la noticia no afectó a Sofía en modo alguno, pero al cabo de unos días empezó a sentir la pérdida de una manera más bien amortiguada y la sintió cada vez más, si bien nunca acerbamente. Estaba totalmente convencida de que Chirac jamás podría haber ejercido una poderosa atracción sobre ella. Siguió soñando, de tarde en tarde, con el tipo de pasión que la habría satisfecho, ardiente pero contenida como un fuego que calentara una espléndida estancia de una casa rica pero prudente.

Estaba especulando acerca de cuál sería su futuro y de si, por inercia, estaba condenada a permanecer para siempre en la Rue Bréda, cuando la sorprendió la Comuna. Se sintió más irritada que asustada por causa de la Comuna; irritada de que una ciudad tan necesitada de reposo e industria se permitiera semejantes payasadas. Para muchas personas, la Comuna fue una experiencia peor que el asedio, pero no para Sofía. Era mujer y extranjera. Niepce estaba infinitamente más inquieto que ella; temía por su vida. Sofía saldría al mercado y correría sus riesgos. Es cierto que, durante un tiempo, toda la población de la casa se fue a vivir al sótano y los encargos al carnicero y otros comerciantes se daban por encima de la medianera del patio contiguo, que comunicaba con un callejón. ¡Una extraña existencia, y probablemente peligrosa! Pero las mujeres que la experimentaron y que también habían vivido el asedio no se sintieron muy intimidadas por

ella, a menos que tuviesen un marido o amante dedicado a la política activa.

Durante la mayor parte del año 1871 Sofía no cesó de ganar para vivir ni de ahorrar dinero. Miraba el *sou* y mostró una creciente tendencia a pedir a sus inquilinos todo lo que pudieran pagar. Se justificaba ante sí misma declarando de forma ostentosa todos los detalles de sus precios de antemano. Tuvo el mismo efecto final, con la ventaja de que las facturas no provocaran ninguna situación desagradable. Sus dificultades empezaron cuando París recuperó por fin su aspecto y su vida normales; cuando todas las mujeres y los niños volvieron a las estaciones de la ciudad, que habían abandonado en apretadas e histéricas muchedumbres; cuando se reabrieron los pisos que llevaban tanto tiempo cerrados y los hombres, que durante un año habían tenido las ventajas y las desventajas de estar sin mujer y sin familia, echaron de nuevo raíces en el hogar. Fue entonces cuando Sofía ya no pudo mantener alquiladas todas las habitaciones. Las había alquilado de manera fácil y permanente y con rentas altas, pero no a hombres sin estorbos. Casi a diario había rechazado a atractivas inquilinas que llevaban lindos sombreros o a agradables caballeros que sólo querían un cuarto a condición de poder ofrecer hospitalidad a unas coquetas faldas. Era inútil proclamar en voz alta que su casa era «seria». La ambición que abrigaba la mayoría de aquellas jubilosas personas era vivir en una casa «seria», porque cada una de ellas estaba convencida en el fondo de que era una persona seria y totalmente distinta del resto del mundo jubiloso. El carácter del piso de Sofía, en lugar de repeler al tipo indebido de aspirante, atraía de modo infalible precisamente a ese tipo. En su seno jamás se extinguía la esperanza. Oían que en casa de Sofía no tenían ninguna oportunidad, pero, con todo, lo intentaban. Y de vez en cuando Sofía cometía un error y ocurría algo desagradable antes de que fuera posible rectificarlo. El hecho era que aquella calle era demasiado para ella. Pocas personas darían crédito a que hubiese una casa de huéspedes seria en la Rue Bréda. Ni la propia policía lo daría. Y la belleza de Sofía estaba en su contra. En aquella época, la Rue Bréda era tal vez la calle más conocida del centro de París; se hallaba en el apogeo de su reputación como refugio de todo acto indecoroso; y acumulaba contra sí misma ese prejuicio que, unos treinta años después, obligó a las autoridades a cambiarle el nombre acatando el deseo de sus comerciantes. Cuando Sofía salía a la compra con su bolsito, hacia las once de la mañana, la calle estaba salpicada de mujeres que habían salido a la compra sin bolsito. Pero mientras que Sofía iba totalmente vestida y con gorro, las otras iban en bata y zapatillas, o capa de teatro y zapatillas y ni se habían retirado el pelo de los ojos hinchados. En las tiendecillas de la Rue Bréda, la Rue Notre Dame de Lorette y la Rue des Martyrs, uno se hallaba sin duda muy cerca de los instintos primitivos de la naturaleza humana. Era asombroso; era divertido; era excitantemente pintoresco; y la universalidad de los modales hacía que fuese absurdo indignarse. Pero el barrio no era ciertamente un lugar en el que una mujer de la raza, formación y carácter de Sofía pudiera ganarse la vida cómodamente, ni siquiera existir. Ella no podía luchar contra toda la calle. Era ella, y no la calle, la que estaba fuera de lugar y equivocada. ¡No es de sorprender que los vecinos se encogieran de hombros cuando hablaban con ella! ¿Qué mujer hermosa —pero qué inglesa chiflada— habría tenido la idea de establecerse en la Rue Bréda con la intención de vivir como una monja y obligar a otros a hacer lo mismo?

A fuerza de continuo ingenio, Sofía se las arregló para ganar algo más que para cubrir gastos, pero poco a poco se vio forzada a admitir en su fuero interno que aquella situación no podía durar.

Entonces, cierto día, vio en el *Galignani's Messenger* un anuncio de una pensión inglesa en venta en la Rue Lord Byron, en el barrio de los Campos Elíseos. Pertenecía a unos tales Frensham y había gozado de alguna popularidad antes de la guerra. El propietario y su esposa, sin embargo, no habían sido lo bastante previsores en cuanto a las vicisitudes de la política en París. En vez de ahorrar dinero durante su época de popularidad, lo habían puesto a cargo y en manos de la señora Frensham. El asedio y la Comuna casi los habían arruinado. Con capital podrían haber recuperado su antiguo orgullo, pero su capital se había agotado. Sofía contestó al anuncio. Impresionó a los Frensham, que estaban encantados con la idea de hacer tratos comerciales con un honrado rostro inglés. Como muchos ingleses en el extranjero, tenían la extraña obsesión de que habían abandonado una isla de gentes honradas para vivir entre ladrones y atracadores. Siempre insinuaban que la falta de honradez era una cosa desconocida en Gran Bretaña. Ofrecieron a Sofía, si quería hacerse cargo del arrendamiento, venderle todos sus muebles y su reputación por diez mil francos. No aceptó, pues el precio le pareció absurdo. Cuando le pidieron que pusiera uno ella, dijo que prefería no hacerlo. Ante su insistencia, sugirió cuatro mil francos. Entonces le hicieron ver que consideraban justificadas sus vacilaciones al mencionar un precio tan ridículo. Y su confianza en el honrado rostro inglés se debilitó. Sofía se fue. Cuando volvió a la Rue Bréda sintió como un alivio que la cosa hubiera quedado en nada. No preveía con exactitud cuál iba a ser su futuro, pero por lo menos tenía claro que rehuía la responsabilidad de la Pensión Frensham. A la mañana siguiente recibió una carta en que se ofrecían a aceptar seis mil francos. Escribió declinando la oferta. Le era indiferente y no quería moverse de los cuatro mil. Los Frensham cedieron. Les apenó, pero cedieron. El centelleo de cuatro mil francos en efectivo y la libertad resultaron demasiado tentadores.

De este modo, Sofía se convirtió en propietaria de la Pensión Frensham en la fría y correcta Rue Lord Byron. Hizo sitio en ella para casi todos sus restantes muebles, de modo que en vez de estar demasiado poco

amueblada, como suele suceder con las pensiones, lo estaba en exceso. Al principio fue muy circunspecta, pues sólo el arrendamiento eran cuatro mil francos al año y los precios del barrio eran alarmantemente distintos de los de la Rue Bréda. Aquello le quitaba mucho el sueño. Durante algunas noches, llevando instalada en la Rue Lord Byron como una quincena, apenas durmió nada, y no comió más de lo que durmió. Recortó los gastos al mínimo y muchas veces iba andando a la Rue Bréda a hacer la compra. Con la ayuda de una asistenta a seis *sous* la hora lo hacía todo. Y aunque los clientes eran escasos, la hazaña tenía algo de milagro, pues Sofía tenía que cocinar.

Los artículos que escribió Georges Augustus Sala con el título de «París vuelve a ser el mismo» deberían haberlos pagado en oro los comerciantes y dueños de pensiones de la ciudad. Despertaron en los ingleses la curiosidad y el deseo de contemplar el escenario de tan terribles acontecimientos. Su efecto se dejó sentir de inmediato. Menos de un año después de su afortunada compra, Sofía había adquirido confianza y empleaba a dos criadas, que trabajaban mucho por salarios bajos. También había adquirido modales de propietaria. Se la conocía como señora Frensham. Los Frensham habían dejado colgado entre las dos ventanas un rótulo dorado, «Pensión Frensham», y Sofía no lo había quitado. A menudo explicaba que su apellido no era Frensham, pero en vano. Todos los visitantes, inevitable y persistentemente, se dirigían a ella con arreglo al rótulo. Estaba fuera de la comprensión general que la propietaria de la Pensión Frensham se llamara de otra manera que Frensham. Pero después surgió otro grupo de personas, habituales de la Pensión Frensham, que conocían el verdadero apellido de la propietaria y se enorgullecían de saberlo, y gracias a este conocimiento se distinguían del rebaño. Lo que sorprendía a Sofía era la asombrosa semejanza de sus huéspedes. Todos hacían las mismas preguntas, proferían las mismas exclamaciones, realizaban las mismas excursiones, regresaban habiendo hecho los mismos juicios y exhibían la misma incólume seguridad de que los extranjeros eran en verdad una gente muy peculiar. Nunca parecían progresar en conocimientos. Acudían continuamente de Inglaterra exploradores a los que había que encaminar al Louvre o al Bon Marché.

El único interés de Sofía eran sus beneficios. La excelencia de su casa estaba firmemente establecida. La mantuvo en alza y lo mismo hizo con los modestos precios. Muchas veces tenia que rechazar huéspedes. Lo hacía mostrando una distante condescendencia. Sus modales para con los huéspedes se tiñeron de una rígida formalidad y con los indeseables era excesivamente firme. Llegó a estar seriamente convencida de que una pensión tan buena como la suya no la había en el mundo, ni jamás la había habido ni podría haberla. Era el colmo de la amabilidad y de la respetabilidad. Su preferencia por lo respetable llegó a constituir una pasión. Y no había defectos en aquel establecimiento. Hasta los muebles de *madame* Foucault, otrora despreciados, se habían convertido misteriosamente en el mejor mobiliario concebible; sus grietas fueron santificadas.

Jamás tuvo noticias de Gerald ni de su propia familia. De los miles de personas que estuvieron bajo su perfecto techo, ni una sola mencionó Bursley ni reveló que conociera a nadie a quien Sofía hubiese conocido. Varios hombres tuvieron el ingenio de proponerle matrimonio con mayor o menor habilidad, pero ninguno de ellos fue lo suficientemente hábil como para inquietar su corazón. Había olvidado el rostro del amor. Era una propietaria. Era *la* propietaria: eficiente, elegante, diplomática y enormemente experimentada. No había engaño ni bajeza de la vida parisiense que no conociera ni contra el que no estuviera armada. No era posible sorprenderla ni estafarla.

Pasaron los años, hasta que a sus espaldas hubo un panorama de años. A veces pensaba, en un momento ocioso: «¡Qué extraño que esté yo aquí, haciendo lo que estoy haciendo!». Pero la rutina habitual de su vida se apoderaba de ella al instante. A finales de 1878, el Año de la Exposición, su pensión se componía de dos pisos en lugar de uno y había convertido las doscientas libras robadas a Gerald en más de dos mil.

Libro IV

ASÍ ES LA VIDA

Capitulo I

LA PENSIÓN FRENSHAM

I

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton estaba sentado en el largo comedor de la Pensión Frensham, Rue Lord Byron; parecía fuera de lugar allí. Era una estancia de unos diez metros de longitud y la anchura de dos ventanas, que iluminaban suficientemente la mitad de la mesa alargada, de extremos redondeados. Atenuaba la penumbra de la otra mitad un gran espejo con deslustrado marco dorado, que ocupaba buena parte de la pared de enfrente de las ventanas. Cerca del espejo había un alto biombo de cuatro hojas, y tras él se oía el ruido de una puerta que se abría y cerraba constantemente. En la larga pared a la izquierda de las ventanas había dos puertas, una oscura e importante, una puerta de ceremonia, por la cual pasaba dos veces al día una procesión de personas tímidas y solemnes, en una ocasión hambrientas y en otra saciadas; la otra puerta era más pequeña y acristalada; los cristales estaban pintados con guirnaldas de rosas. No era una puerta original de la casa, sino que se había abierto recientemente en la pared y daba la impresión de conducir a peligros y travesuras. El papel de la pared y las cortinas de la ventana eran ricos y adustos, de tonos oscuros y dibujo misterioso. Sobre la puerta de ceremonia había una cornamenta. Y a intervalos, tan altos que parecían desafiar toda inspección, algunos grabados y cuadros al óleo componían manchas rectangulares sobre la pared. Colgaban de enormes clavos con cabeza de porcelana y representaban al parecer los aspectos más majestuosos del hombre y la naturaleza. Un grabado que estaba sobre la chimenea y más cerca de la tierra que los demás mostraba de manera inconfundible a Luis Felipe y a su familia en actitudes virtuosas. Bajo este grupo real, un gran reloj dorado, flanqueado por candelabros de la misma época, daba la hora exacta: las siete y cuarto.

Ocupaba la estancia la gran mesa blanca, rodeada de cabezas inclinadas y respaldos de sillas. Había más de treinta personas a la mesa; el ruido singularmente amortiguado de sus tenedores y cuchillos en los platos era prueba de que se trataba de gente discreta y correcta. Su ropa —blusas, corpiños y chaquetas— no alegraba la pupila. Sólo dos o tres iban de etiqueta. Hablaban poco, y por lo general en un tono timorato, como si hubiera orden de guardar silencio. Alguno medio susurraba una observación; entonces su vecina, jugueteando distraídamente con su pan y alzando la mirada del plato al vacío, sopesaba concienzudamente la observación y medio susurraba en respuesta: «Supongo que sí». Pero unos pocos hablaban en voz alta y con volubilidad, y los demás, que los envidiaban, los tenían por gente de poca crianza.

La comida era la principal preocupación, como es natural. Los presentes comían como comen los que pagan un precio fijo al día por todo lo que puedan consumir siempre que observen las reglas del juego. Sin mover la cabeza atisbaban por el rabillo del ojo, vigilando las maniobras de las tres doncellas almidonadas que servían. No tenían otro concepto de la comida que en forma de porciones colocadas en filas, en grandes bandejas de plata; cuando una doncella se inclinaba reverente sobre ellos con la bandeja en equilibrio, evaluaban la ofrenda en un instante, y en un instante decidían cuánto podían tomar decorosamente y hasta qué punto podían llevar a la práctica la teórica libertad de elección. Y si los alimentos, por alguna razón, no les tentaban, o si no lograban coincidir ni de lejos con sus aspiraciones, se consideraban agraviados. Pues, de acuerdo con el juego, podían no pedir nada; tenían derecho a apoderarse de todo lo que se presentaba bajo su nariz, como amables tigres, y tenían derecho a rechazarlo: eso era todo. La comida era así una serie de crisis emocionales para los comensales, que sólo sabían que sin cesar salían bandejas llenas y platos limpios de la ruidosa puerta que se ocultaba tras el biombo, y que sin cesar desaparecían bandejas devastadas y platos sucios por la misma puerta. Todos comían alimentos semejantes al mismo tiempo; empezaban juntos y terminaban juntos. Las moscas que rondaban los manojos de papeles colgados de las lámparas, al nivel de los floreros, eran más libres. El único acontecimiento que interrumpía la exacta regularidad de la colación era la llegada fortuita de una botella de vino para uno de los huéspedes. El receptor de la botella de vino firmaba un papelito a cambio de ella y escribía en grandes caracteres un número en la etiqueta de la botella; después, mirando el número y temiendo que después de todo lo leyera mal una doncella estúpida o un compañero poco escrupuloso, lo volvía a escribir en otra parte de la etiqueta, en caracteres todavía más grandes.

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton, evidentemente, no pertenecía a ese mundo. Era un joven de unos veinticinco años, no apuesto pero sí elegante. Aunque no vestía de etiqueta, aunque de hecho llevaba un traje gris muy claro, totalmente inadecuado para una cena, era elegante. El traje, casi nuevo, era de un corte admirable, pero lo llevaba como si nunca hubiera llevado otra cosa. También su conducta, reservada pero no

libre de timidez, su método para manejar el tenedor y el cuchillo, la delicadeza de su manera de trasladar la comida de las bandejas a su plato, todos estos detalles indicaban de modo infalible a los miembros del grupo que Matthew Peel-Swynnerton era superior a ellos. Algunos esperaban que resultara ser hijo de un lord, o incluso un lord. Se le había asignado un extremo de la mesa, de espaldas a una ventana, y quedaba una silla vacía a cada lado; esta situación favorecía las esperanzas relativas a su alto rango. En realidad era hijo, nieto y varias veces sobrino de fabricantes de loza. Reparó en que la gran «compota» (como se denominaba en su oficio) que marcaba el centro de la mesa era producto de su empresa. Ello le sorprendió, pues Peel, Swynnerton y Co., conocidos y venerados en las Cinco Ciudades como «los Peel», no servían a mercados baratos.

Causó cierto sobresalto en el comedor un huésped tardío, un hombre de mediana edad grueso y fofo, cuya nariz habría suscitado la hostilidad provisional de quienes se han convencido de que los judíos no son como los demás. Su nariz no lo catalogaba claramente como un usurero y asesino de Cristo, pero era sospechosa. Sus ropas colgaban sueltas y podían haber pertenecido a otra persona. Se acercó a la mesa con rápida seguridad, hizo una inclinación, un tanto demasiado efusiva, a varias personas y se sentó junto a Peel-Swynnerton. Una de las doncellas le trajo al momento un plato de sopa; él le dijo «gracias, Marie», sonriéndole. Era evidentemente uno de los habituales de la casa. Sus ojos, detrás de las gafas, transmitían la seguridad que da el conocer a las chicas por sus nombres. Se hallaba en grave desventaja en la carrera por la manutención, pues llevaba un retraso de dos platos y medio, pero se puso a la altura con gran celeridad y luego, una vez logrado esto, suspiró y su sociable mirada se dirigió claramente a Peel-Swynnerton.

—¡Ah! —exclamó—, ¡Es un fastidio esto de llegar tarde, señor!

Peel-Swynnerton asintió a regañadientes.

—¡No es un trastorno sólo para uno! ¡Lo es para la casa! ¡A las criadas no les gusta!

—No —murmuró Peel-Swynnerton—. Me imagino que no.

—Sin embargo, no es que *yo* llegue tarde muchas veces —prosiguió el hombre—. Algunas no puedo evitarlo. ¡Los negocios! Lo peor de estos hombres de negocios franceses es que no tienen noción del tiempo. ¡Citas ...! ¡Dios me ampare!

—¿Viene usted aquí con frecuencia? —interrogó Peel-Swynnerton. Detestaba a aquel individuo de una manera totalmente injustificada, quizá porque se sujetaba la servilleta debajo de la barbilla, pero veía que era uno de esos conversadores decididos que siempre acaban ganando. Además, como estaba claro que no era un turista corriente en París, el tipo despertaba en él una cierta curiosidad.

—Vivo aquí —dijo el otro—. Es muy cómodo para un soltero, ya sabe. Ya hace años. Mi oficina está justo al lado. Tal vez conozca mi nombre: Lewis Mardon.

Peel-Swynnerton vaciló. Aquella vacilación lo acusaba de «no conocer su París» bien.

—Agente inmobiliario —añadió Lewis Mardon rápidamente.

—Oh, sí —dijo entonces Peel-Swynnerton, recordando vagamente haber visto aquel nombre entre los anuncios en los quioscos de prensa.

—Creo —continuó el señor Mardon— que mi nombre es tan conocido como el que más en París.

—Así lo pienso —afirmó Peel-Swynnerton.

La conversación languideció durante unos momentos.

—¿Se quedará aquí mucho tiempo? —preguntó el señor Mardon, que conceptuaba a Peel-Swynnerton como un hombre elegante y de medios y le desconcertaba su presencia en aquella mesa.

—No lo sé —respondió Peel-Swynnerton.

Era una mentira, justificada en la opinión del que la decía como una manera de rechazar la vulgar curiosidad del señor Mardon, la curiosidad que podría haber esperado de un tipo que se remetía la servilleta bajo la barbilla. Peel-Swynnerton sabía con exactitud cuánto tiempo iba a estar allí. Iba a estar dos días más; no le quedaban más que unos cincuenta francos en el bolsillo. Había estado poniéndose en ridículo en otro barrio de París y había descendido hasta la Pensión Frensham por ser un lugar donde podía estar absolutamente seguro de no gastar más de doce francos diarios. La casa tenía buena fama y estaba a mano del

Museo Galliera, donde estaba haciendo algunos dibujos que había venido a Francia expresamente a hacer y sin los cuales no podía volver dignamente a Inglaterra. Era capaz de cometer tonterías, pero también de ser prudente, y era difícil que presión alguna lo indujese a escribir a casa pidiendo dinero para suplir el gastado en ponerse en ridículo.

El señor Mardon fue consciente de que le ponían trabas. Pero, siendo de una disposición amoldable, probó de inmediato en otra dirección.

—¿Es buena la comida aquí, verdad? —sugirió.

—Mucho —replicó Peel-Swynnerton con sinceridad—. Yo estaba muy...

En aquel momento, una mujer alta y erguida, de edad incierta, abrió la puerta principal y permaneció un instante en el umbral. Peel-Swynnerton tuvo el tiempo justo para observar que era hermosa y pálida y que tenía el cabello negro, y después se marchó, seguida de un caniche de pelo recortado que la acompañaba. Había hecho seña, con un breve gesto, a una de las sirvientas, que se puso inmediatamente a encender las lámparas de gas que pendían sobre la mesa.

—¿Quién es? —preguntó Peel-Swynnerton, sin reflexionar en que ahora era él el que estaba haciendo avances hacia el tipo cuya servilleta cubría toda la pechera de su camisa.

—Es la patrona —dijo el señor Mardon en voz más baja y semiconfidencial.

—¡Oh! ¿La señora Frensham?

—Sí. Pero su verdadero apellido es Scales —dijo con orgullo el señor Mardon.

—Viuda, supongo.

—Sí.

—¿Y dirige ella todo el cotarro?

—Dirige todo el invento —repuso con solemnidad el señor Mardon—; ¡y no cometa usted ningún error! —Iba adoptando un tono de familiaridad.

Peel-Swynnerton lo rechazó una vez más, contemplando con estudiado e indiferente descuido los quemadores de gas, que explotaban uno detrás de otro con un ruidito al contacto con la vela que les aplicaba la doncella. La mesa blanca resplandecía más blanca que nunca bajo el gas llameante. Los que estaban al extremo del comedor, lejos de la ventana, sonrieron instintivamente, como si hubiera empezado a brillar el sol. El aspecto de la cena había cambiado para mejor; con la reiterada afirmación de que las tardes estaban acortando aunque todavía estaban en julio, la conversación se hizo casi general. En dos minutos, el señor Mardon estaba hablando cordialmente con toda la longitud de la mesa. La colación acabó en una atmósfera que se asemejaba a la camaradería.

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton no saldría a gozar de los deleites crepusculares de París. A menos que se mantuviera al resguardo de la Pensión, no podía pretender culminar con éxito su reconversión de la estupidez a la sabiduría. De modo que atravesó valientemente la pequeña puerta decorada con rosas, saliendo a un reducido patio, cubierto con una cristalera y equipado con palmeras, sillones de mimbre y dos mesitas; encendió una pipa y sacó de su bolsillo un ejemplar del *Referee.* Aquel retiro era denominado el salón; era la única parte de la Pensión en la que fumar no era un auténtico delito ni una transgresión de las buenas formas. Se sentía solo. Se dijo lúgubremente, de un tirón, que el placer no era más que paparruchas, y, a reglón seguido, preguntó al universo por qué el placer no podía durar para siempre y por qué él no era el señor Barney Bamato. Entraron en el retiro dos hombres de edad y encendieron cigarrillos con muchas precauciones. Después apareció el señor Mardon y, con osadía, se sentó cerca de Matthew, como si fuese un amigo privilegiado. Al fin y al cabo, el señor Mardon era mejor que no tener a nadie y Matthew decidió soportarlo, sobre todo cuando empezó, sin escaramuza preliminar alguna, a hablar de la vida en París. ¡Un tema irresistible! El señor Mardon dijo en tono mundano que era fácil hacer agradable la existencia de un soltero en París. Pero que, por supuesto, él..., bueno, él prefería, por regla general, algo del estilo de la Pensión Frensham; y para sus negocios era excelente. Sin embargo no podía..., ya sabía... Comparó las ventajas de lo que denominó «andar por ahí» en París con su equivalente en Londres. Su información sobre Londres estaba anticuada, y Peel-Swynnerton podría corregirle importantes detalles. Pero su información sobre París era infinitamente valiosa e interesante para el joven, que veía que hasta entonces había vivido extrañamente engañado.

—¿Le apetece un whisky? —preguntó de repente el señor Mardon—, Es muy bueno aquí —añadió.

—¡Gracias! —repuso Peel-Swynnerton arrastrando las vocales.

No había modo de resistir la tentación de escuchar al señor Mardon mientras éste quisiera hablar. Y luego, cuando los hombres de edad se habían marchado, estaban contándose cosas el uno al otro con toda franqueza, en la semipenumbra del retiro. Luego, cuando la reserva de historias llegó a su fin, el señor Mardon se pasó la lengua por los labios para recoger la última gota de whisky y exclamó «¡Sí!», como dando una confirmación general a todo lo que se había dicho.

—¡Tómese uno conmigo! —dijo cortésmente Matthew. Era lo menos que podía hacer.

La Marie del señor Mardon llevó al salón la segunda remesa de whiskies. Él le sonrió con familiaridad y observó que se imaginaba que se iría a dormir pronto, después de un duro día de trabajo. Ella, como respuesta, hizo una *moue*[56] y un movimiento impaciente y se marchó en medio del frufrú de sus faldas.

—Funciona bien, ¿verdad? —comentó el señor Mardon, como si Marie fuera una pieza de una exposición agrícola—. Hace diez años era muy lozana y linda, pero ni qué decir tiene que un sitio como éste les quita todo.

—Pero aun así —repuso Peel-Swynnerton—, tiene que gustarles, o no se quedarían..., es decir, a menos que las cosas sean muy distintas aquí de como son en Inglaterra.

La conversación parecía haberle acicateado a examinar la cuestión de la mujer en todos sus aspectos, con curiosidad filosófica.

—¡Oh! Claro que les gusta —le aseguró el señor Mardon, en el tono del que sabe bien lo que se dice—. Además, la señora Scales las trata bien. Lo sé de buena tinta. Me lo ha dicho ella. Es muy suya —miró a su alrededor como si las paredes oyeran—, y por Júpiter que hay que serlo, pero las trata bien. Le costaría a usted creer los salarios que ganan, y lo que sisan. Ahora bien, en el Hotel Moscú... ¿Conoce el Hotel Moscú?

Por suerte, Peel-Swynnerton lo conocía. Le habían aconsejado que lo evitase porque sólo admitía visitantes ingleses, pero en la Pensión Frensham había aceptado algo todavía más exclusivamente británico que el Hotel Moscú. El señor Mardon mostró gran alivio ante su respuesta afirmativa.

—El Hotel Moscú es ahora una sociedad limitada —dijo—, inglesa.

—¿De verdad?

—Sí. Yo la refloté. Fue idea mía. ¡Un gran éxito! Por eso lo sé todo acerca del Hotel Moscú. —Recorrió de nuevo las paredes con la mirada—. Quería hacer lo mismo aquí —murmuró, y Peel-Swynnerton tuvo que hacer ver que apreciaba aquella confidencia—, Pero no hay modo de que acceda. Lo he intentado por todos los medios. ¡No hay nada que hacer! Es una verdadera lástima.

—¿Es rentable, no?

—¿Esta casa? ¡Ya lo creo que sí! Y pienso que estoy en situación de juzgar, me parece a mí. La señora Scales es una de las mujeres más astutas con que se puede uno topar en su vida. Ha ganado mucho dinero aquí, mucho dinero. Y no hay razón para que una casa como ésta no pueda ser cinco veces mayor. Diez veces. Las posibilidades son ilimitadas, señor mío. Lo único que se necesita es capital. Pero lo que dice ella es que no quiere que sea mayor. Dice que ahora tiene el tamaño justo para que ella lo pueda manejar. No es así. Es una mujer que podría manejar cualquier cosa —es una administradora nata —pero, aunque así fuese, todo lo que tendría que hacer sería retirarse: dejamos la casa y el nombre. Es el nombre lo que cuenta. ¡Y ella ha hecho que el nombre de Frensham valga lo suyo, bien puedo decírselo!

—¿Recibió la casa de su marido? —inquirió Peel-Swynnerton. El apellido Scales le intrigaba.

El señor Mardon negó con la cabeza.

—Lo compró ella sola, cuando ya no estaba con su marido, por una bicoca, ¡una bicoca! Lo sé porque yo conocía a los Frensham originarios.

—Debe de llevar usted mucho tiempo en París —dijo Peel-Swynnerton.

El señor Mardon era incapaz de resistirse a una oportunidad de hablar de sí mismo. La suya era un historia asombrosa. Y Peel-Swynnerton, aunque despreciaba a aquel hombre por su fatuidad, se sintió impresionado. Y cuando aquello concluyó...

—¡Sí! —exclamó el señor Mardon tras una pausa, confirmando todo en general mediante un solo monosílabo.

Poco después se puso en pie, diciendo que sus hábitos eran regulares.

—¡Buenas noches! —saludó, con una sonrisa mecánica.

—Bu-buenas noches —respondió Peel-Swynnerton, tratando de forzarse a emplear un tono de camaradería, pero sin conseguirlo. La intimidad entre los dos, que había brotado como un champiñón, se deshizo repentinamente en polvo. El comentario no pronunciado de Peel-Swynnerton a espaldas del señor Mardon fue «¡borrico!». Sin embargo, lo que sabía se había incrementado indudablemente en el transcurso de la tarde. Y todavía era temprano. ¡Las diez y media! ¡El Folies-Marigny, con su bella arquitectura y sus innumerables sanitarios blancos, su espumear de champán y cerveza y sus músicos de ajustada chaqueta roja, estaba justo entonces empezando a tener vida, y a un tiro de piedra! Peel-Swynnerton imaginó el salón aterrazado y centelleante que había sido el origen primero de su extraordinaria estupidez. E imaginó todos los demás lugares de diversión, grandes y pequeños, enguirnaldados con blancas linternas, de los Campos Elíseos; y los oscuros laterales de los Campos Elíseos, por donde caminaban penosamente misteriosas figuras pálidas cobijadas por los árboles, mientras de los lugares de diversión y de los restaurantes salían fragmentos de disparatadas canciones o de absurda música para metales. Quería salir a gastar aquellos cincuenta francos que le quedaban en el bolsillo. Al fin y al cabo, ¿por qué no telegrafiar a Inglaterra pidiendo más dinero? «¡Oh, maldita sea!» se dijo, ferozmente; estiró los brazos y se puso en pie. El salón era muy pequeño, tenebroso y deprimente.

En el vestíbulo ardía una intensa luz incandescente, que iluminaba crudamente los sillones de mimbre, un baúl atado con cuerdas, con una etiqueta azul y roja pegada, un barómetro Fitzroy, un plano de París, un cartel en colores de la Compañía Transatlántica y el refugio de caoba de la portera. En aquel refugio se hallaba no sólo la portera —una mujer de edad que lucía un gorro blanco sobre su arrugado rostro sonrosado —sino también la dueña del establecimiento. Hablaban en murmullos; parecían muy bien dispuestas la una hacia la otra. La portera era respetuosa, pero también lo era la dueña. El vestíbulo, con su única luz, que ardía tranquilamente, estaba bañado en una honrada calma, la calma de un día de trabajo terminado, de la paulatina relajación de la tensión, de la creciente expectativa del descanso. En su sencillez afectó a Peel-Swynnerton como pudiera haberle afectado un tónico para los nervios. En aquel vestíbulo, aunque la vida nocturna del exterior estaba empezando a despertar a la actividad, parecía que la noche estaba ya avanzada y que solamente aquellas dos mujeres velaban en una mansión llena de durmientes. Y todos los relatos que habían intercambiado Peel-Swynnerton y el señor Mardon cayeron al nivel de un chismorreo bobo y lamentable. Peel-Swynnerton pensó que su deber hacia la casa era retirarse al lecho. Pensó también que no podía abandonar la casa sin decir que iba a salir, y que le faltaba valor para decir deliberadamente a las dos mujeres que iba a salir, ¡a aquellas horas de la noche! Se dejó caer en uno de los sillones e hizo un segundo intento de leer con detenimiento el *Referee*. ¡Inútil! O su mente estaba fuera, en los Campos Elíseos, o su mirada vagaba disimuladamente hasta la figura de la señora Scales. No podía distinguir bien su rostro porque se hallaba sumido en la sombra de la caoba.

Entonces la portera salió de su chiscón y, ligeramente encorvada, cruzó con celeridad el vestíbulo, sonriendo con simpatía al huésped al pasar por delante de él, y desapareció en la escalera. La dueña se quedó sola en el refugio. Peel-Swynnerton se puso en pie de un salto, bruscamente, dejando caer el periódico con un crujido, y se acercó a ella.

—Discúlpeme —le dijo en tono deferente—, ¿Ha venido alguna carta para mí esta noche?

Sabía que era imposible que le llegasen cartas, ya que nadie conocía su dirección.

—¿Qué nombre? —La pregunta era fríamente cortés y la interpelante le miraba a la cara directamente. Sin duda era una mujer hermosa. El cabello se le estaba volviendo gris en las sienes y su frente estaba marchita y cruzada por pequeñas arrugas. Pero era hermosa. Era una de esas mujeres de la última de las cuales que quede en la tierra dirá el extraño: «¡Cuando era joven debía de valer la pena mirarla!», sintiendo un leve y pasajero pesar porque las mujeres bellas no puedan permanecer jóvenes para siempre. Su voz era firme, sin alteraciones; su tono era dulce, y sin embargo moralmente áspero a causa del incesante tráfico con todas las variedades de la naturaleza humana. Sus ojos eran los ojos imparciales de quien está siempre juzgando. Y

evidentemente era un ser orgulloso, incluso altivo, con su esmerada y controlada cortesía. Evidentemente se consideraba superior a cualquier huésped. Sus ojos proclamaban que había vivido y aprendido, que sabía más de la vida que cualquier persona con que se pudiera topar y que, habiendo triunfado en la vida de manera tan notable, tenía una enorme confianza en sí misma. La prueba de su éxito era la singular casa Frensham. También había en aquellos ojos una conciencia de la singularidad de la casa Frensham. Teóricamente, la actitud mental de Matthew Peel-Swynnerton hacia los patrones de casas de huéspedes era condescendiente, pero en este caso no era así. Tenía el respeto verdadero de un hombre que de momento, sea como fuere, está impresionado más allá de todo cálculo. Bajó los ojos al responder:

—Peel-Swynnerton. —Luego los volvió a alzar.

Lo dijo con desmaño, temerosamente, como si supiera que estaba jugando con fuego. Si aquella señora Scales era la tía de su amigo Cyril Povey, tenía que conocer esos dos apellidos, tan famosos en la región. ¿Se sobresaltó? ¿Dejó ver un signo de que se sentía perturbada? Al principio, él creyó captar un síntoma de emoción, pero al cabo de un instante estaba seguro de no haber captado tal cosa y de que era una tontería suponer que se hallaba en las puertas de algo novelesco. Entonces ella se volvió hacia el casillero, a cuyo lado se encontraba, y él vio su rostro de perfil. Tenía un repentino y asombroso parecido con el perfil de Cyril Povey, un parecido inconfundible y absolutamente decisivo. La nariz y la curva del labio superior eran totalmente los de Cyril. Matthew Peel-Swynnerton tenía una sensación muy extraña. Se sentía como un criminal en peligro de ser atrapado in fraganti y no podía entender por qué se sentía así. La patrona miró en el hueco de la P y en el de la S.

—No —dijo con toda tranquilidad—. No veo nada para usted.

Dominado por un acceso de temeraria audacia, él dijo:

—¿Ha tenido recientemente a alguien de apellido Povey?

—¿Povey?

—Sí. Cyril Povey, de Bursley, en las Cinco Ciudades.

Era muy impresionable, muy sensible aquel hombre. La voz le tembló al decir aquello. Pero la de ella tembló también al responder:

—¡No, que yo recuerde! ¡No! ¿Esperaba usted que estuviera aquí?

—Bueno, no tenía seguridad —balbuceó—, Gracias. Buenas noches.

—Buenas noches —deseó ella aparentemente de la manera mecánica de la patrona que da las buenas noches a docenas de extraños cada día.

Él subió a toda prisa la escalera y se cruzó con la portera, que bajaba. «¡Bien, bien!», pensó. «¡Qué cosa más rara...!». E hizo repetidos movimientos afirmativos con la cabeza. Por fin se había encontrado con algo *realmente* extraño en el espectáculo de la existencia. Le había correspondido a él descubrir a la mujer legendaria que había huido de Bursley antes de que él naciera y de la que nadie sabía nada. ¡Qué noticia para Cyril! ¡Qué pasmoso episodio! Apenas pudo dormir aquella noche. Se preguntaba si sería capaz de verse cara a cara con la señora Scales sin timidez por la mañana. Sin embargo, se ahorró la dura prueba de verse cara a cara con ella. No apareció en el transcurso de todo el día siguiente, ni la vio antes de marcharse. No pudo hallar un pretexto para preguntar por qué estaba invisible.

II

El coche de Matthew Peel-Swynnerton se detuvo ante el número 26 de Victoria Grove, Chelsea; su bolsa iba en el techo. El cochero llevaba una flor roja en el ojal. Matthew saltó del vehículo, sujetándose el sombrero de paja con una mano. Al llegar al suelo se refrenó instantáneamente y adoptó un aire de despreocupada tranquilidad. Junto a la puerta lateral del número 26 había otra figura con sombrero de paja y vestida de gris, que en aquel instante encendía un cigarrillo.

—¡Hola, Mat! —exclamó la segunda figura, con voz velada debido a que todavía estaba aplicando la

cerilla al cigarrillo y soplando—. ¿Qué significa todo este barullo? Precisamente quería verte.

Tiró la cerilla con un movimiento del brazo y estrechó la mano de Matthew, soltando el humo por las fosas nasales.

—Yo también quería verte a ti —dijo Matthew—. Y sólo dispongo de un minuto. Iba a Euston; tengo que coger el tren de las doce y cinco.

Miró a su amigo y, con toda seguridad, no vio un rasgo suyo que no lo fuera también del rostro de la señora Scales. Y la mujer tenía la misma actitud corporal que el joven. Era completamente desconcertante.

—Toma un cigarrillo —respondió Cyril Povey, imperturbable. Era dos años más joven que Matthew, del que había adquirido la mayor parte de su amplio e intrincado conocimiento de la vida y el arte, junto con algunas principales nociones de comportamiento, y del que era en realidad discípulo en todas las materias que interesan a los jóvenes. Pero ya había superado a su profesor. Podía hacerse pasar por mayor de lo que era con mucho más éxito que Matthew.

El cochero contempló con aprobación cómo encendían el segundo cigarrillo; luego sacó un cigarro y dejó ver sus dientes grandes y blancos al arrancar el extremo. La aparición y modales de su cliente, la calidad de la bolsa y los primeros gestos de la entrevista entre los dos jóvenes le habían infundido un talante optimista. No esperaba de él una conducta miserable y poco caballerosa a la llegada a Euston. Conocía el lenguaje de la inclinación de un sombrero de paja. Y en Londres hacía un día espléndido. El grupo de las dos elegancias, dominado por la perfección del cochero, ofrecía un llamativo cuadro de masculinidad triunfante, satisfecha de sí misma y sin carencia alguna.

Matthew tomó el brazo de Cyril y lo condujo calle abajo, más allá de la puerta que llevaba al estudio (oculto detrás de una casa) que Cyril tenía alquilado.

—Escucha, muchacho —empezó—: he encontrado a tu tía.

—Bueno, es muy amable por tu parte —repuso Cyril solemnemente—. Es un acto de amistad. ¿Puedo preguntar a qué tía?

—A la señora Scales —dijo Matthew—, ya sabes...

—¿No será...? —El rostro de Cyril cambió.

—¡Sí, exactamente! —exclamó Matthew, pensando que no se iba a ver privado del legítimo gozo de ver que causaba sensación. Era indudable que había causado sensación en Victoria Grove.

Cuando hubo contado toda la historia a Cyril, éste dijo.

—Entonces, ¿no sabe quién eres?

—Creo que no. No; estoy seguro de que no. A lo mejor se lo imagina.

—Pero ¿cómo puedes estar seguro de que no estás equivocado? Puede que...

—Escucha, muchacho —le interrumpió Matthew—, No estoy equivocado.

—Pero no tienes ninguna prueba.

—¡Al diablo las pruebas! —dijo Matthew con irritación.

—¡Oh! ¡Está bien! ¡Está bien! Lo que me tiene más perplejo es qué demonios hacías tú en un sitio como ése. Según tu descripción, debe de ser una...

—Fui allí porque estaba sin blanca —explicó Matthew.

—¿Juergas?

Matthew asintió.

—¡Qué mala pata! —comentó Cyril cuando Matthew le narró el prólogo a la pensión Frensham.

—¡Bueno, ella juró que nunca aceptaba más de doscientos francos! ¡Y esa impresión daba, además! ¡Y bien que lo valía! Me lo pasé mejor que en toda mi vida con esa mujer. Una cosa te puedo decir: no quiero

más inglesas. Es que ni cuentan.

—¿Cuántos años tenía?

Matthew reflexionó judicialmente.

—¡Yo diría que treinta! —Fue contemplado con admiración y envidia. Tuvo el legítimo gozo de causar una nueva sensación—. Ya te contaré más cuando vuelva —añadió—. Puedo abrirte los ojos, hijo mío.

Cyril sonrió tímidamente.

—¿Por qué no puedes quedarte ahora? —preguntó—. Voy a hacer el vaciado del brazo de esa chica de Verrall esta tarde y sé que no puedo hacerlo solo. Y Robson no me sirve. Es justo a ti a quien necesito.

—¡No puedo! —dijo Matthew.

—Pues entra un minuto en el estudio, por lo menos.

—No tengo tiempo; perderé el tren.

—Me da igual si pierdes cuarenta trenes. Es preciso que entres. Tienes que ver esa fuente —insistió Cyril, contrariado.

Matthew cedió. Cuando salieron de nuevo a la calle, después de seis minutos de desaforado interés de Cyril por su propia obra, Matthew se acordó de la señora Scales.

—Me imagino que escribirás a tu madre —dijo.

—Sí —repuso Cyril—; le escribiré, pero, si por casualidad la ves, podrías decírselo tú.

—Lo haré —afirmó Matthew—, ¿Vas a ir a París?

—¡Qué! ¿A ver a la tía? —Sonrió—, No sé. Depende. Si mi madre afloja para los gastos... es una idea —dijo con ligereza, y luego, sin cambiar de tono—: Desde luego, si vas a estar perdiendo el tiempo toda la mañana no es probable que cojas el de las doce y cinco.

Matthew subió al coche, mientras el cochero, con la colilla de un cigarro entre sus dientes al descubierto, se agachaba para apartar las riendas al paso del sombrero de paja inclinado.

—Por cierto, préstame algún dinero —pidió Matthew—. Menos mal que tengo billete de vuelta. Me he quedado más pelado que en toda mi vida.

Cyril sacó ocho chelines de plata. Con la seguridad que le confirió la posesión de esta riqueza, Matthew interpeló al cochero:

—¡A Euston, como alma que lleva el diablo!

—Sí, señor —repuso el cochero tranquilamente.

—¿No vas por mi camino, supongo? —se le ocurrió de repente a Matthew, justo cuando el coche empezaba a moverse.

—No; voy al barbero —gritó Cyril en respuesta, agitando la mano.

El caballo entró en Fulham Road, haciendo traquetear el coche.

III

Tres días después, iba Matthew Peel-Swynnerton por la plaza del mercado de Bursley cuando, justo enfrente del ayuntamiento, se encontró con una dama de mediana edad, baja y gruesa y vestida de negro, con un abrigo negro bordado, un gorrito atado con cintas negras y adornado con frutas de azabache y hojas de

crespón. En su lenta y cautelosa manera de andar tenía el aspecto digno e importante de una mujer provinciana que ha estado acostumbrada a ser tratada con deferencia en su ciudad natal y cuyos ingresos son lo bastante cuantiosos para arrancar la obsequiosidad a las personas vulgares de todas las categorías. Pero nada más ver a Matthew su rostro cambió. Se convirtió en una mujer sencilla e ingenua. Se ruborizó levemente, sonriendo con tímido placer. Para ella, Matthew pertenecía a una raza superior. Su familia se había distinguido en la región durante generaciones. «¡Peel!». Uno podría pronunciar este nombre junto con el de «Wedgwood» sin que resultara impropio. Y «Swynnerton» no se hallaba mucho más bajo. Ni el amor propio de la dama, que era grande, ni su sentido común, que superaba con mucho a la media, podían permitirle hacer extensiva a los Peel la teoría de que un hombre vale tanto como otro. Los Peel nunca compraban en la Plaza de San Lucas. Ni siquiera en sus mejores días pudo esperar la Plaza semejante condescendencia. Los Peel compraban en Londres o en Stafford; como mucho, en Oldcastle. Eso era distinción para la rechoncha y avejentada señora de negro. ¡Pero si, al cabo de seis años, aún no se había recuperado de la sorpresa de que su hijo y Matthew se trataran con modales toscos, como amigos! Ella y Matthew no se veían mucho, pero se caían bien. La involuntaria mansedumbre de la dama halagaba a Matthew. Y la elaborada cortesía con que éste la trataba la halagaba a ella. Él admiraba su bondad innata, y los rapapolvos que de vez en cuando le echaba a Cyril parecían sumirlo en un éxtasis de gozo.

—Bien, señora Povey —la saludó, mirándola desde arriba con el sombrero levantado. (Era una moda que había adquirido en París) —. Aquí estoy: ya lo ve.

—Es usted todo un extraño, señor Matthew. No necesito preguntarle cómo está. ¿Ha visto a mi hijo últimamente?

—Desde el miércoles no —respondió Matthew—, Le habrá escrito, me imagino.

—No puedo decir «claro que sí» —rió con desmayo—. Recibí una breve carta suya el miércoles por la mañana. Decía que estaba usted en París.

—Pero desde entonces... ¿no le ha escrito?

—¡Santo cielo, tendré suerte si tengo noticias suyas el sábado! —dijo Constanza con tristeza—. No será de escribir cartas de lo que se muera Cyril.

—Pero ¿quiere decir que no le ha...?

—¿Qué sucede? —inquirió Constanza.

Matthew no sabía qué hacer ni qué decir.

—¡Oh, nada!

—Bien, señor Matthew, por favor... —El tono de Constanza había cambiado de repente. Se había tornado firme, imperioso y profundamente receloso. Para ella, la conversación había dejado de ser una charla intranscendente.

Matthew vio cuán nerviosa y frágil era. Nunca se había dado cuenta antes de lo sensible que era a las nimiedades, aunque estaba claro que nadie podía hablar con ella de Cyril en plan de broma. Le asombraba verdaderamente la despreocupación, la vergonzosa despreocupación del joven. Matthew sabía bien que la actitud de Cyril hacia su madre se caracterizaba por una cierta negligencia benévola, pero que no le hubiese escrito dándole la importante noticia referente a la señora Scales era totalmente inexcusable; Matthew decidió que así se lo diría a Cyril. Sintió honda pena por la señora Povey. Le parecía patética, allí plantada, ignorante de un hecho trascendente que debiera conocer. Se alegró de no haber dicho nada de la señora Scales a nadie salvo a su propia madre, que prudentemente le había conminado a guardar silencio, diciendo que su única obligación, una vez que se lo había dicho a Cyril, era mantener la boca cerrada hasta que los Povey hablaran. De no haber sido por el consejo de su madre, no hay duda de que habría difundido la sorprendente historia y la señora Povey se habría enterado de ella por boca de un extraño, lo cual habría sido en extremo cruel para ella.

—¡Oh! —Matthew trató de sonreír alegre y maliciosamente—. Seguro que tiene noticias suyas mañana.

Quería convencerla de que le estaba ocultando simplemente alguna deliciosa sorpresa. Pero no lo consiguió. Con toda su experiencia del mundo y de las mujeres, no fue lo bastante listo para engañar a aquella sencilla mujer.

—Estoy esperando, señor Matthew —dijo, en un tono que hizo desaparecer la sonrisa del rostro cordial

de Matthew. Era implacable. Lo cierto era que en un instante se había persuadido de que Cyril había conocido a alguna muchacha y estaba comprometido para casarse. No podía pensar otra cosa.

—¿Qué ha hecho Cyril? —interrogó.

—No tiene nada que ver con Cyril.

—Entonces ¿qué es?

—Se trata de..., de la señora Scales —murmuró, casi temblando. Como ella no replicó, limitándose a mirar a su alrededor de una manera peculiar, le dijo—: ¿Caminamos un poco? —Y se volvió en la dirección en la que iba ella. Constanza obedeció la indicación.

—¿Qué ha dicho usted? —le preguntó. El nombre de Scales, durante un momento, no le dijo nada. Pero cuando lo comprendió tuvo miedo, de manera que dijo abstraída, como si quisiera retrasar una conmoción—: ¿Qué ha dicho usted?

—Dije que se trata de la señora Scales. ¿Sabe? La co-conocí en París —Y se estaba diciendo a sí mismo: «No debería decírselo a esta pobre mujer aquí, en la calle. Pero ¿qué puedo hacer?».

—¡No, no! —musitó ella.

Se detuvo y lo miró con expresión preocupada. Luego, él observó que la mano en la que llevaba el bolsito describía extrañas curvas sin objeto en el aire y que su rostro sonrosado se había vuelto amarillento, como si lo hubiera pintado de una pincelada un invisible pincel. Matthew estaba perplejo.

—¿No sería mejor que...? —empezó.

—Eh... —dijo ella—. Necesito sentarme. —Se le cayó el bolso.

Matthew la sostuvo hasta la puerta de la tienda de Allman, el ferretero. Por desgracia había que subir dos peldaños para entrar en la tienda y ella no pudo. Se derrumbó como un saco de harina en el primero. El joven Edward Allman corrió a la puerta. Llevaba un delantal negro y jugueteaba con él en su nerviosismo.

—¡No la levante; no trate de levantarla, señor Peel-Swynnerton! —exclamó cuando Matthew, instintivamente, empezó a hacer lo que no debía.

Matthew se detuvo, con aire estúpido y sintiéndose como tal, y él y el joven Allman se contemplaron impotentes durante un segundo por encima del cuerpo de Constanza Povey. Una parte de la plaza del mercado percibió entonces que estaba sucediendo algo inusual. Fue el señor Shawcross, el farmacéutico de al lado de la tienda de Allman, el que hizo frente a la situación como es debido. Lo había visto todo mientras estaba vendiendo una fotografía kodak a una joven y acudió corriendo con un frasco de sales. Constanza se recuperó con gran rapidez. No se había desmayado del todo. Exhaló un prolongado suspiro y susurró débilmente que estaba bien. Los tres hombres la ayudaron a entrar en la oscura tienda de altos techos, que olía a clavos y a lustre de cocinas, y la acomodaron en una desvencijada silla.

—¡De verdad —exclamó el joven Allman con su vozarrón, cuando ella pudo sonreír y el rosa iba volviendo, renuente, a sus mejillas—, no debe damos esos sustos, señora Povey!

Matthew no dijo nada. Por lo menos había producido una auténtica sensación. Una vez más se sintió como un criminal y no pudo entender por qué.

Constanza anunció que regresaría a casa andando despacio, por el patio de Cock y Wedgwood Street. Pero cuando, al mirar en tomo suyo con recobradas fuerzas, vio el friso de caras que había en la puerta, convino con el señor Shawcross en que sería mejor que tomase un coche. El joven Allman se acercó a la puerta y silbó para llamar al único que estaba perpetuamente en la entrada principal del ayuntamiento.

—El señor Matthew vendrá conmigo —dijo Constanza.

—Claro que sí; será un placer —respondió Matthew.

Y la mujer atravesó la pequeña muchedumbre de curiosos del brazo del señor Shawcross.

—Cuídese, señora —le dijo el señor Shawcross por la ventanilla del coche—. El tiempo está opresivo, y ya no somos unos jovenzuelos, creo yo.

Ella asintió con un gesto.

—Lamento muchísimo haberla perturbado, señora Povey —le dijo Matthew cuando el coche arrancó.

Ella movió la cabeza, rechazando sus disculpas por innecesarias. Tenía los ojos llenos de lágrimas. En menos de un minuto el vehículo se detuvo ante la puerta de veteado claro de Constanza. Pidió su bolsito a Matthew, que lo llevaba desde que se le había caído. Quería pagar al cochero. Nunca antes había permitido Matthew que una mujer pagara un coche en el que él hubiera viajado, pero con Constanza no se podía discutir. Constanza era peligrosa.

Amy Bates, que seguía viviendo en la cueva, había visto las ruedas del coche por la reja de su ventana y había subido jadeando la escalera de la cocina para abrir la puerta antes de que Constanza hubiese llegado a lo alto de los escalones. Amy, que con toda seguridad tenía más de cuarenta años, era una mujer de autoridad. Quiso saber qué pasaba y Constanza tuvo que decirle que se había sentido «indispuesta». Amy tomó el sombrero y el abrigo y se fue a hacer té. Cuando estuvieron solos, Constanza dijo a Matthew:

—Y bien, Matthew, ¿quiere contármelo todo?

—No es más que esto —empezó.

Y se lo contó, en pocas palabras; realmente parecía no ser «más que eso». Y, sin embargo su voz temblaba, por simpatía con la emoción, dominada pero visible, de la avejentada mujer. Le parecía que el ridículo saloncito debería estar lleno de alegría, pero el estado de ánimo que lo presidía no tenía nombre; desde luego no era la alegría. Él mismo se sentía muy triste, desolado. Hubiera dado mucho dinero por evitarse aquella experiencia. Sólo sabía que en el recuerdo de aquella rechoncha, cómica y afable mujer de la mecedora había removido cosas antiguas, muy antiguas; que la había despertado de sueños que podrían haber sido eternos. No sabía que estaba sentado en el mismo sitio donde antaño estuvo el sofá en el que yacía Samuel Povey cuando una bella y desvergonzada chiquilla de quince años le sacó la muela. No sabía que Constanza estaba sentada en la misma mecedora que ocupaba la señora Baines en aquel inútil conflicto con la misma indomable muchacha. No sabía diez mil cosas que se agitaban violentamente en el inmenso corazón de Constanza.

Ésta lo sometió a un interrogatorio detallado. Pero no le hizo las preguntas que él, en su inocencia, esperaba, como si su hermana estaba muy envejecida, si tenía el cabello gris, si estaba gorda o delgada. Y hasta que Amy, engañada y molesta, hubo servido el té en una pequeña bandeja de plata, se mantuvo relativamente serena. Fue al tragar un sorbo de té cuando se derrumbó y Matthew tuvo que cogerle la taza.

—No sabe cuánto se lo agradezco, señor Matthew —lloró—. No podría expresarle cuánto se lo agradezco.

—Pero no he hecho nada —protestó él.

Ella movió la cabeza.

—Nunca esperé esto. ¡Nunca lo esperé! —prosiguió. Me hace muy feliz... en cierto modo. No debe usted hacerme caso. Soy una tonta. Si es tan amable de apuntarme esa dirección... Y tengo que escribir a Cyril ahora mismo. Y tengo que ver al señor Critchlow.

—La verdad, es muy raro que no le haya escrito a usted Cyril —dijo Matthew.

—Cyril no ha sido un buen hijo —replicó ella con una repentina y solemne frialdad—. ¡Pensar que se ha podido guardar que...! —Se echó a llorar de nuevo.

Finalmente, Matthew vio la posibilidad de marcharse. Sintió que la mano tibia, blanda y arrugada de Constanza rodeaba sus dedos.

—Se ha portado usted muy bien en este asunto —le dijo—, Y con mucha inteligencia. En *todo,* tanto allí como aquí. Nadie podría haber mostrado mejores sentimientos. Es un gran consuelo para mí saber que mi hijo tiene un amigo como usted.

Cuando él pensó en sus escapadas y en el conocimiento, inexpresable en Bursley, fantásticamente imposible en Bursley, que había transmitido al hijo de Constanza, se maravilló de que el instinto maternal se viera engañado de aquel modo. Sin embargo, pensó que aquellos elogios eran merecidos.

Una vez fuera dejó escapar un «¡uf!» de alivio. Sonrió en el más mundano de sus estilos. Pero la sonrisa

era fingida. ¡Una farsa para sí mismo! ¡Un pueril intento de ocultarse cuán profundamente le había conmovido una escena natural!

IV

La noche en que Matthew Peel-Swynnerton habló con la señora Scales, no fue él la única persona de la Pensión Frensham que no pudo conciliar el sueño. Al bajar de su recado, la anciana portera observó que la dueña salía del chiscón de caoba.

—¡Está durmiendo tranquilamente, la pobre! —dijo la portera en cumplimiento de su encargo, que consistía en ver cómo estaba la perra de aquélla, *Fossette.* Al decirlo, su temblorosa voz de anciana estaba llena de simpatía por el animal enfermo. Semejaba una figura sacada de una casa de beneficencia, con su piel sonrosada, de aspecto quebradizo, su estrecho vestido negro y su gorro blanco con volantes. Solía estar encorvada y siempre caminaba velozmente, con la cabeza unos centímetros por delante de los pies. Su pelo gris era ralo. Era vieja; quizá nadie sabía con exactitud cuánto. Sofía la había tomado con la pensión, hacía más de un cuarto de siglo, porque era vieja y no podría haber encontrado fácilmente otro lugar. Aunque la clientela era casi exclusivamente inglesa, no hablaba más que francés y se entendía con los británicos por medio de benévolas sonrisas.

—Creo que me iré a dormir, Jacqueline —dijo el ama en respuesta.

Una extraña respuesta, pensó Jacqueline. La inalterable costumbre de Jacqueline era retirarse a medianoche y levantarse a las cinco y media. Su señora se retiraba también alrededor de medianoche, y a última hora las dos se veían mucho. Y considerando que Jacqueline acababa de ser enviada a la propia habitación de la señora a echar un vistazo a *Fossette* y que el boletín era satisfactorio, y que *madame* y Jacqueline tenían, como de costumbre, varios asuntos cotidianos que tratar, resultaba raro que *madame* se fuera de inmediato a dormir. Sin embargo, Jacqueline no dijo nada más que:

—Muy bien, *madame.* ¿Y el número 32?

—Arrégleselas usted como pueda —dijo la patrona, cortante.

—Está bien, *madame.* Buenas noches, *madame,* y que duerma bien.

Jacqueline, sola en el vestíbulo, regresó a su chiscón y emprendió una de las inacabables y misteriosas tareas en que se ocupaba cuando no estaba corriendo de acá para allá o silbando por los tubos.

Sofía, casi sin molestarse en echar siquiera una ojeada a la cesta redonda de *Fossette,* se desvistió, apagó la luz y se metió en la cama. Se sentía extremada e inexplicablemente lúgubre. No quería reflexionar; tenía poderosos deseos de no reflexionar, pero su mente insistía en la reflexión: una reflexión monótona, vana y penosa. ¡Povey! ¡Povey! ¿Podría tratarse del Povey de Constanza Povey, el único Samuel Povey? Es decir, no él sino su hijo, el hijo de Constanza. ¿Tenía Constanza un hijo adulto? ¡Constanza tenía que tener ya más de cincuenta años; quizá era abuela! ¿De verdad se había casado con Samuel Povey? Tal vez hubiese muerto. Desde luego, su madre habría muerto, y tía Harriet, y el señor Critchlow. Si viviera, su madre tenía que tener lo menos ochenta años.

El efecto acumulado del simple hecho de permanecer inactivo cuando uno debería estar activo era terrible. Era indudable que debería haberse comunicado con su familia. Era una tontería no haberlo hecho. Al fin y al cabo, aunque hubiera robado, siendo una niña, una insignificante cantidad de dinero a su acaudalada tía, ¿qué hubiera importado? Había sido orgullosa. Era criminalmente orgullosa. Ése era su vicio. Lo admitía con franqueza. Pero no podía cambiar su orgullo. Todo el mundo tiene algún punto débil. Su fama de sagacidad, de sentido común, era enorme, bien lo sabía; cuando hablaba con alguien siempre tenía la sensación de que la consideraban una mujer de una sensatez poco corriente. Y, no obstante, había sido culpable de la mayúscula locura de aislarse de su familia. Se iba haciendo mayor y estaba sola en el mundo. Se estaba haciendo rica; tenía la pensión más perfectamente dirigida y más respetable del mundo (así lo creía sinceramente) y estaba sola en el mundo. Conocidos tenía —franceses que nunca ofrecían ni aceptaban otra hospitalidad que té o vino, y uno o dos miembros de la colonia comercial inglesa—, pero su única amiga era *Fossette,* que tenía tres años. Era la persona más solitaria del mundo. No había tenido noticias de Gerald ni de nadie. Nadie en absoluto podía tener verdadero interés por su suerte. Eso era lo que había sacado en limpio

después de un cuarto de siglo de incesantes trabajos y preocupaciones, tiempo durante el cual no se había alejado ni una sola vez de la Rue Lord Byron más de treinta horas seguidas. Era atroz, el paso de los años, pero aún lo sería más. ¿Dónde estaría al cabo de diez años? Se imaginó muriéndose. ¡Qué espanto!

Por supuesto, no había nada que la impidiera regresar a Bursley y reparar el gran error de su juventud. ¡No, nada salvo el hecho de que toda su alma retrocedía ante la simple idea de tal empresa! Ella era un elemento de la Rue Lord Byron. Formaba parte de la calle. Sabía todo lo que pasaba o podía pasar allí. Estaba unida a ella por las pesadas cadenas de la costumbre. A la fría manera del prolongado hábito, la amaba. ¡Aquella calle! Habían apagado, como cada noche, el incandescente quemador de gas del farol, en el exterior. Si es posible amar ese fenómeno, ella lo amaba. Aquel fenómeno era parte de su vida, querido para ella.

¡Un joven agradable, aquel Peel-Swynnerton! Así pues, estaba claro que, después de su marcha de Bursley, había habido algún matrimonio o asunto testamentario entre los Peel y los Swynnerton, socios en el negocio. ¿Sospechaba quién era ella? Tenía una expresión tímida y culpable. ¡No! No podía haber sospechado quién era. La idea era ridícula. Probablemente ni siquiera sabía que su apellido era Scales. Y aunque lo supiera, lo más probable era que jamás hubiera oído hablar de Gerald Scales ni conociera la historia de su fuga. ¡Si ni siquiera habría nacido cuando ella se marchó de Bursley! Además, los Peel estuvieron siempre muy apartados de la vida social corriente de la ciudad. ¡No! No podía haber sospechado su identidad. Era infantil pensar semejante cosa.

Y sin embargo —prosiguió inconscientemente en la maraña de su afligido espíritu—, ¿y si lo hubiera sospechado? ¿Y si, por alguna extraña casualidad, hubiera oído hablar de su olvidada historia y hubiera atado cabos? ¿Y si simplemente mencionaba en las Cinco Ciudades que la Pensión Frensham la dirigía una tal señora Scales? «¿Scales? ¿Scales?», repetiría quizá la gente. «Oye, ¿qué me recuerda eso?». ¡Y la pelota rodaría y rodaría hasta que Constanza o alguien la recogiera! Y entonces...

Además —un detalle en cuya importancia al principio no había reparado, inexplicablemente—, aquel Peel-Swynnerton era amigo del señor Povey por el que había preguntado... En ese caso no podía ser el mismo señor Povey. ¡Era imposible que los Peel mantuviesen relaciones de amistad con Samuel Povey o con sus parientes! Pero ¿y si después de todo así fuese? ¿Y si en las Cinco Ciudades hubiera sucedido algo imprevisto y revolucionario?

Se sentía inquieta, insegura. Preveía que se harían investigaciones acerca de ella. Preveía un enorme alboroto familiar, una serie interminable de payasadas, la alteración de su existencia, la destrucción de su tranquilidad. Y aquella perspectiva la hundió en el desánimo. No podía afrontarla. No quería afrontarla. «¡No! —gritó con pasión dentro de su alma—. He vivido sola y me quedaré como estoy. No puedo cambiar a estas alturas de mi vida». Y su actitud hacia una posible invasión de su soledad se tomó en resentimiento. «¡No lo consentiré! ¡No lo consentiré! Quiero que me dejen en paz. ¡Constanza! ¿Qué puede significar Constanza para mí, o yo para ella, ya?». La visión de un cambio cualquiera en su existencia le resultaba en extremo dolorosa. ¡Y no solamente dolorosa! La atemorizaba. La hacía acobardarse. Pero no podía desecharla... No podía liberarse de ella mediante el razonamiento. La aparición de Matthew Peel-Swynnerton había alterado el fondo mismo de su ser.

Y alrededor de la tormenta que bullía en el centro de su cerebro surgían diez mil temores acerca de la administración de la pensión. Todo era negro, sin esperanzas. La pensión podría haber sido el mayor fracaso comercial que una grave negligencia y la incapacidad hayan provocado jamás. ¿No era cierto que tenía que supervisarlo todo por sí misma, que no podía depender de nadie? Si se ausentara, aunque no fuese más que un día, toda la estructura se hundiría inevitablemente. En vez de trabajar menos, trabajaba más. ¿Y quién le garantizaba que sus inversiones estaban seguras?

Cuando el alba se anunció, descubriendo lentamente cada objeto de la estancia, Sofía estaba enferma. Le parecía que la fiebre hacía estragos en su cabeza. Tenía extrañas sensaciones en la boca. *Fossette* se agitaba en su cesta, junto al largo pupitre, sobre el que había variopintas carpetas y papeles, ordenados con minucioso cuidado.

—*¡Fossette!* —trató de llamar, pero no salió ningún sonido de sus labios. No podía mover la lengua. Trató de sacarla y no pudo. Durante horas había sido consciente de que tenía jaqueca. Se le cayó el alma a los pies. Estaba enferma de pánico. Su recuerdo voló a su padre y al ataque por él sufrido. ¡Ella era hija suya! ¡Parálisis! *«Ça serait le comble!*[57]*»,* pensó en francés, horrorizada. ¡Su miedo se tornó abyecto! «¿Puedo mover algo?», pensó, y sacudió la cabeza con fuerza. Sí, podía moverla un poco sobre la almohada y podía estirar el brazo derecho, los dos brazos. ¡Qué absurda cobardía! ¡Claro que no era un ataque! Se tranquilizó. Sin embargo, no podía sacar la lengua. De repente le acometió el hipo y no pudo dominarlo. Alargó la mano hacia la campanilla, cuyo sonido haría acudir al hombre que dormía en una dependencia que daba al vestíbulo, y repentinamente el hipo cesó. Dejó caer la mano. Se sentía mejor. Además, ¿de qué servía llamar a

un hombre si no iba a poder hablarle a través de la puerta? Tenía que esperar a Jacqueline. Todas las mañanas a las seis, en verano y en invierno, Jacqueline entraba en la habitación de su señora para dejar salir a la perra a tomar el aire un momento bajo su supervisión. El reloj que había en la repisa de la chimenea marcaba las tres y cinco. Tenía que aguardar tres horas. *Fossette* correteó por la habitación, saltó a la cama y se acurrucó. Sofía no le hizo caso, pero a *Fossette,* que estaba ella también malucha y aletargada, no pareció importarle.

Jacqueline se retrasaba. En el cuarto de hora que medió entre las seis y las seis y cuarto, Sofía sufrió las mayores angustias de la desesperación y estuvo al borde de la demencia. Le parecía que le iba a estallar el cráneo por la presión interna. Luego, la puerta se abrió silenciosamente, unos centímetros. Generalmente, Jacqueline entraba en la habitación, pero a veces se quedaba detrás de la puerta y llamaba con su voz débil y temblona *«¡Fossette! ¡Fossette!».*

Y aquella mañana no entró en la habitación. La perrita no respondió enseguida. Sofía padecía horriblemente. Reunió toda su voluntad, todo su dominio de sí misma y sus fuerzas, para gritar:

—*¡Jacqueline!*

Salió de ella, un nacimiento espantosamente horrible y deforme, pero salió. Se quedó exhausta.

—Sí, *madame* —Jacqueline entró.

En cuanto vio a Sofía, se echó las manos a la cabeza. Sofía la miraba fijamente, muda.

—¡Voy a buscar al médico yo misma! —musitó Jacqueline, y huyó.

—*¡Jacqueline!* —La mujer se detuvo. Entonces Sofía se forzó a hablar y obligó a sus músculos a hacer un esfuerzo inaudito.

—No digas nada a los demás. —No podía soportar que toda la casa supiera de su enfermedad. Jacqueline hizo un gesto de asentimiento y desapareció, seguida de la perra. Jacqueline lo comprendió. Vivía en la casa con su ama como si fuesen dos conspiradoras.

Sofía empezaba a sentirse mejor. Consiguió sentarse en la cama, aunque el movimiento la mareó. Haciendo por bajar hacia los pies de la cama logró mirarse en el espejo del armario. Vio que tenía la parte inferior de la cara retorcida y fuera de su sitio.

El médico, que la conocía y ganaba mucho dinero en su casa, le dijo con franqueza lo que tenía. «Parálisis glosolabiolaríngea», fue la expresión que utilizó. Ella lo comprendió. Un ataque muy leve, debido al exceso de trabajo y a las preocupaciones. Le ordenó reposo absoluto y tranquilidad.

—¡Imposible! —exclamó ella, auténticamente convencida de que era indispensable.

—¡El reposo más absoluto! —repitió el médico.

Sofía se maravillaba de que unas cuantas palabras con un hombre que casualmente se llamaba Peel-Swynnerton pudieran haber traído como consecuencia semejante desastre y obtuvo una curiosa satisfacción de aquella terrible muestra de un temperamento extremadamente nervioso. Pero ni siquiera entonces se dio cuenta de cuán llena de inquietud estaba.

V

«Mi querida Sofía...»

El milagro inevitable había sucedido. ¡Sus sospechas acerca de aquel señor Peel-Swynnerton eran fundadas después de todo! ¡Allí tenía una carta de Constanza! La letra del sobre no era la de Constanza, pero incluso antes de examinarla tuvo una peculiar aprensión. Recibía cartas de Inglaterra casi todos los días preguntando por las habitaciones y los precios (y en muchas de ellas tenía que pagar tres peniques de suplemento porque los remitentes, descuidados o demasiado cuidadosos, se olvidaban de que un sello de un penique no era suficiente); no había nada que diferenciara aquel sobre, pero nada más echarle un vistazo se sobresaltó; cuando, al descifrar el emborronado matasellos, vio la palabra «Bursley», tuvo la sensación de que

el corazón literalmente se le paraba y abrió la carta temblando violentamente, pensando para sí: «El médico diría que esto es muy malo para mí». Seis días habían pasado desde su ataque y había mejorado asombrosamente; la deformación de la cara casi había desaparecido. Pero el médico se ponía serio; no le prescribió medicina alguna, solamente un tónico, e insistía monótonamente en el «reposo más absoluto», en una completa tranquilidad mental. Decía poco más, dejando a Sofía juzgar por sus silencios la gravedad de su estado. ¡Sí; el recibir aquella carta era sin duda malo para ella!

Se dominó mientras la leía, tendida en la cama, envuelta en su bata y apoyada en varias almohadas; no se le empañaron los ojos, ni sollozó, ni reveló físicamente que no estaba leyendo una reserva de dos habitaciones durante una semana. Pero el gasto de fuerza nerviosa necesario para aquel dominio de sí misma fue terrible.

La letra de Constanza había cambiado; era, sin embargo, fácilmente reconocible como la evolución de la pulcra caligrafía de la muchacha que sabía hacer etiquetas para el escaparate. ¡La S de Sofía se formaba de la misma manera que en la última carta que había recibido de ella en Axe!

Mi querida Sofía:

No puedo decirte lo que me ha alegrado saber que después de todos estos años estabas viva y bien y que además te va tan bien. Estoy deseando verte, mi querida hermana. Fue Peel-Swynnerton quien me lo dijo. Es amigo de Cyril. Cyril es mi hijo. Me casé con Samuel en 1867. Cyril nació en 1874, en Navidad. Ahora tiene veintidós años y le va muy bien en Londres; está estudiando escultura, aunque es muy joven. Le dieron una Beca Nacional. Sólo hay ocho en toda Inglaterra y le dieron una a él. Samuel murió en 1888. Si lees los periódicos, sin duda te enteraste del caso Povey. Me refiero, por supuesto, a Daniel Povey, repostero. Aquello fue lo que mató al pobre Samuel. Nuestra pobre madre murió en 1875. Parece que fue ayer. La tía Harriet y la tía María han muerto las dos. El viejo doctor Harrop murió y su hijo está casi retirado. Tiene un socio, un escocés. El señor Critchlow se casó con la señorita Insull. ¿Has visto cosa igual? Se quedaron con la tienda y yo vivo en la parte de vivienda; la otra se tapió. Los negocios en la Plaza ya no son lo que eran. Los clientes se van a Hanbridge en los trenes de vapor, y se dice que van a poner trenes eléctricos, pero me imagino que no son más que rumores. Tengo una criada muy buena. Lleva mucho tiempo conmigo, pero las criadas ya no son como antes. Yo estoy muy bien, salvo la ciática y las palpitaciones. Desde que Cyril se fue a Londres he estado muy sola. Pero trato de animarme y dar gracias por lo que tengo. Estoy segura de que tengo mucho que agradecer. ¡Y ahora, tener noticias tuyas! Por favor, escríbeme una carta larga y cuéntame todo acerca de ti. París está muy lejos. Pero estoy segura de que, ahora que sabes que sigo estando aquí, vendrás a hacerme una visita, por lo menos. Todo el mundo estaría encantado de verte. Y yo estaría muy orgullosa y muy contenta. Como te digo, estoy muy sola. El señor Critchlow dice que hay mucho dinero esperándote. ¿Sabes?, es el fideicomisario. Está la mitad de mamá y la de la tía Harriet, que se han ido acumulando. Por cierto, han abierto una suscripción para la señorita Chetwynd, pobrecilla. Su hermana ha muerto y ella ha quedado en la miseria. Yo he aportado veinte libras. Bueno, por favor, querida hermana, escríbeme enseguida. Ya ves que sigo teniendo la antigua dirección. Recibe, mi querida Sofía, todo mi cariño. Tu hermana que te quiere,

Constanza Povey

PS. —Tendría que haber escrito ayer, pero no estaba en condiciones. Cada vez que me sentaba a escribir me echaba a llorar.

—¡Por supuesto —dijo Sofía a *Fossette—,* espera que vaya yo a verla en vez de venir ella a verme a mí! Y, sin embargo, ¿quién es la que está más ocupada?

Pero esta observación no era seria. No era más que una nadería, un bordado afectuoso y malicioso que Sofía colocó en el borde de su honda satisfacción. El espíritu mismo del amor sencillo parecía emanar del papel en el que Constanza había escrito. Y este espíritu despertó repentina y totalmente el amor de Sofía por Constanza. ¡Constanza! En aquel momento no había para Sofía en el mundo un ser como Constanza. Constanza personificaba para ella las cualidades de la familia Baines. La carta de Constanza era una gran carta, una carta perfecta, perfecta en su falta de artificio; la expresión natural del carácter de los Baines en sus mejores aspectos. ¡Ni una alusión torpe en toda ella! ¡Ninguna expresión de sorpresa por nada de lo que ella,

Sofía, hubiese hecho o dejado de hacer! ¡Ni una referencia a Gerald! ¡Sólo una sublime aceptación de la situación tal como era y la seguridad de un amor no disminuido. ¿Tacto? ¡No; era algo mejor que eso! El tacto era consciente, hábil. Sofía estaba segura de que la idea del tacto no había entrado en la cabeza de Constanza. La carta, sencillamente, le había salido del corazón. Y eso era lo que hacía que fuese tan magnífica. Sofía estaba convencida de que nadie sino una Baines podría haber escrito una carta semejante.

Pensó que tenía que ponerse a la altura de aquella carta, que también ella tenía que mostrar la sangre de los Baines. Y se dirigió a su pupitre y se puso a escribir (en su papel privado) con aquella letra suya, grande y autoritaria, tan diferente de la de Constanza. Empezó la carta en tono formal, pero después de unas líneas su alma generosa y apasionada respondía libremente al llamamiento de Constanza. Le pidió que el señor Critchlow pagara veinte libras en su nombre al fondo para la señorita Chetwynd. Le habló de su pensión y de París, y de su alegría al recibir la carta de Constanza. Pero no le dijo nada de Gerald ni de la posibilidad de una visita a las Cinco Ciudades. Terminó la carta con un derroche de cariño y pasó de ella, como de un sueño, a la estéril banalidad de la vida cotidiana de la Pensión Frensham, pensando que, en comparación con el afecto de Constanza, nada tenía ningún valor.

Pero no quiso considerar el proyecto de ir a Bursley. Jamás, jamás iría a Bursley. Si Constanza decidiera ir a París a verla, estaría encantada, pero ella no se movería. La simple idea de un cambio cualquiera en su existencia la intimidaba. Y en cuanto a volver a Bursley..., ¡no, no!

Sin embargo, en la Pensión Frensham el futuro no podía ser como el pasado. La salud de Sofía lo impedía. Ella sabía que el médico estaba en lo cierto. Cada vez que hacía un esfuerzo sabía íntimamente y de inmediato que el médico estaba en lo cierto. Sólo su fuerza de voluntad estaba intacta; la maquinaria a través de la cual la fuerza de voluntad se convierte en acción estaba misteriosamente dañada. Era consciente de ese hecho. Pero aún no podía enfrentarse a él. Tendría que pasar tiempo para que fuera capaz de enfrentarse a él. Se estaba haciendo mayor. Ya no podía recurrir a las reservas. No obstante, insistía a todo el mundo en que estaba totalmente recuperada y en que se abstenía de su acostumbrado trabajo simplemente por exceso de prudencia. Cierto era que su rostro se había recuperado. Y la pensión, que era una máquina cuyas partes estaban en buen orden, al parecer seguía funcionando sin tropiezo como siempre. Es verdad que el excelente jefe de cocina empezó a sisar, pero su cocina no se resintió de ello; las consecuencias no se dejaron ver durante un largo período. Todo el personal y muchos de los huéspedes sabían que Sofía había estado indispuesta, y no sabían más.

Cuando por azar Sofía observaba un defecto en la marcha diaria de la casa, su primer impulso era ir a la raíz y remediarlo; el segundo era dejarlo estar o paliarlo con algún remedio superficial. Insospechada y sin embargo vagamente sospechada por diversas personas, se había iniciado la decadencia de la Pensión Frensham. La marea, tras haber subido hasta su punto más alto, estaba retrocediendo, pero tan poco que nadie podía estar seguro de que había cambiado. De vez en cuando subía de nuevo y bañaba la piedra más alejada.

Sofía y Constanza intercambiaron varias cartas. Sofía dijo repetidas veces que no podía salir de París. Al final pidió sin más a Constanza que fuese a hacerle una visita. Hizo la sugerencia con temor —pues la posibilidad de ver de verdad a su querida Constanza la alarmaba—, pero no pudo por menos de hacerla. Y a los pocos días tuvo una respuesta en la que Constanza le comunicaba que habría ido, al cuidado de Cyril, pero que su ciática había empeorado mucho de pronto y se veía obligada a echarse todos los días después de comer para descansar las piernas. Viajar le resultaba imposible. Los hados se conjuraban contra los propósitos de Sofía.

Y entonces Sofía empezó a interrogarse acerca de sus obligaciones para con Constanza. La verdad era que estaba tanteando a su alrededor buscando una excusa para revocar su decisión. Tenía miedo de revocarla; sin embargo, le resultaba tentadora. Deseaba hacer algo que desaprobaba. Era como el deseo de arrojarse desde un alto balcón. Tiraba de ella, tiraba de ella, y ella tiraba en sentido contrario. Ahora la pensión le causaba tedio. La aburría demasiado incluso para fingir que era la jefa supervisora. En toda la casa, la disciplina se había relajado.

Se preguntaba cuándo renovaría el señor Mardon su propuesta de transformar su empresa en una sociedad limitada. A pesar de sí misma, se hacía la encontradiza con él y le daba oportunidades para volver sobre el viejo tema. Él nunca la había dejado tanto tiempo en paz antes. Era indudable que, la última vez que la abordó, ella lo había convencido absolutamente de que sus esfuerzos no tenían la menor posibilidad de éxito y que había decidido cesar en ellos. Con una sola palabra, ella podía haberle dado cuerda de nuevo. La mínima indirecta, un día que fuese a pagar la cuenta, y estaría suplicándole. Pero Sofía no era capaz de pronunciar esa palabra.

Entonces empezó a decir abiertamente que no se encontraba bien, que la casa era demasiado para ella y que el médico le había ordenado imperiosamente descanso. Dijo esto a todo el mundo excepto a Mardon. Y

todo el mundo, de una u otra forma, persistió en no decírselo a Mardon. Como el médico le había aconsejado que pasara más tiempo al aire libre, a primera hora de la tarde salía de paseo al Bosque con *Fossette.* Era el mes de octubre. Pero el señor Mardon, al parecer, no tenía ni idea de estos paseos.

Una mañana se la encontró en la calle, cerca de la casa.

—Siento oír que no está usted bien —le dijo en tono confidencial, después de hablar de la salud de *Fossette.*

—¡Que no estoy bien! —exclamó ella, como si le molestara la aseveración—. ¿Quién le ha dicho que no estoy bien?

—Jacqueline. Me dijo que usted comentaba a menudo que necesitaba un cambio total. Y, según parece, lo mismo dice el médico.

—¡Oh! ¡Los médicos! —murmuró ella, sin negar no obstante la verdad de la aserción de Jacqueline. Vio esperanza en los ojos de Mardon.

—Por supuesto, ya sabe —dijo, más confidencialmente aún— que si por casualidad cambiara de idea, siempre estoy dispuesto a formar un pequeño sindicato para quitarle esto de encima —hizo un gesto discreto en dirección a la pensión.

Ella movió la cabeza violentamente, lo cual era extraño, considerando que llevaba semanas deseando oír esas palabras al señor Mardon.

—No es necesario que renuncie usted totalmente —prosiguió él—. Podría conservar el mando. La haríamos directora, con un salario y una parte en los beneficios. Sería el ama igual que lo es ahora.

—¡Oh! —dijo ella despreocupadamente—. Si renunciara, lo haría del todo. No me gustan las medias tintas.

Con esta frase tocó a su fin la historia de la casa Frensham como empresa privada. Sofía lo sabía. El señor Mardon lo sabía. Al señor Mardon le dio un vuelco el corazón. Vio en su imaginación la formación del sindicato preliminar, encabezado por él, y después la reventa por el sindicato a una sociedad limitada, con beneficios. Vio un pequeño y grato beneficio de unos mil para su persona privada, obtenido en un momento. Aquella planta, su esperanza, que había creído muerta, floreció de una manera milagrosamente repentina.

—Bien —repuso—. ¡Renuncie del todo, pues! Tómese unas vacaciones para el resto de su vida. Lo tiene bien merecido, señora Scales.

Ella movió otra vez la cabeza.

—Piénseselo —la exhortó él.

—Ya le di mi respuesta hace años —dijo ella con obstinación, mientras temía que Mardon se lo tomara literalmente.

—Hágame el favor de pensarlo con detenimiento —insistió él—. Se lo recordaré dentro de unos días.

—Será inútil —respondió.

Él se despidió y se fue calle abajo, andando patosamente en su flotante vestimenta, consciente de su fama como Lewis Mardon, el gran agente inmobiliario de los Campos Elíseos, conocido en toda Europa y América.

A los pocos días se lo recordó.

—Sólo hay una cosa que me hace soñar con ello aunque sea por un momento —dijo Sofía—, y es la salud de mi hermana.

—¡Su hermana! —exclamó él. No sabía que tuviera una hermana. Nunca me había hablado de su familia.

—Sí. Sus cartas están empezando a preocuparme.

—¿Vive en París?

—No. En Staffordshire. Nunca ha salido de allí.

Y, con el fin de conservar intacto su orgullo, hizo creer al señor Mardon que Constanza estaba extremadamente grave, aunque lo cierto era que Constanza no tenía nada peor que su ciática e incluso ésta iba algo mejor.

Así fue como cedió.

Capitulo II

EL ENCUENTRO

I

Cierto día de primavera del año siguiente, poco después de comer, el señor Critchlow llamó a la puerta de Constanza. Ésta se hallaba en su mecedora, delante de la chimenea del salón. Llevaba un gran delantal «basto», con cuyos extremos estaba secando a un pequeño foxterrier de pelo duro, para el cual no había encontrado un nombre más original que «M*ancha».* Es verdad que tenía una mancha. Constanza había puesto al mundo por testigo de que jamás volvería a tener un perro joven porque, como ella decía, no podía pasarse la vida corriendo detrás de ellos, y se comían el relleno de los sillones. Pero su último perro había vivido demasiado; un perro puede hacer algo peor que comerse los muebles y, en su reacción natural contra la vejez en los perros y también en la esperanza de retrasar todo lo posible el natural pesar y disgusto que causa la muerte cuando se lleva a un animal doméstico, no había sabido cómo rechazar un foxterrier muy deseable, de diez meses de edad, que le había ofrecido un conocido. La bonita piel rosada de *Mancha* se veía debajo de su revuelto pelo; era exquisitamente suave al tacto y aborrecible para sí mismo. Sus ojos atisbaban sin cesar entre las esquinas de la agitada toalla; estaban llenos de inquietud y vergüenza.

Amy ayudaba en la faena, vigilando con gravedad para que *Mancha* no se escapara a la carbonera. Abrió la puerta al oír llamar al señor Critchlow, que entró sin gastar formalidades, como era habitual. No parecía haber cambiado. Tenía la misma cantidad de cabello blanco, llevaba el mismo largo delantal blanco y su voz (que no obstante mostraba en ocasiones cierta tendencia a tornarse chillona) era tan chirriante como siempre. Seguía estando muy derecho. En la apergaminada mano llevaba un periódico.

—¡Bueno, señora! —saludó.

—Así será suficiente; gracias, Amy —dijo Constanza en voz pausada. Amy se fue con mucha calma.

—¡Así que lo está lavando para ella! —dijo el señor Critchlow.

—Sí —admitió Constanza. *Mancha* clavó la mirada en el anciano.

—¿Y ha visto lo que dice de Sofía el periódico? —inquirió éste, tendiéndole la *Señal.*

—¿De Sofía? —exclamó Constanza—¿Qué ocurre?

—No ocurre nada. Pero se han enterado. Viene en la columna de «Staffordshire día a día». ¡Aquí! Yo se lo leeré —sacó del bolsillo del chaleco un largo estuche de madera para gafas y se puso un segundo par sobre la nariz. Luego se sentó en el sofá, con las rodillas sobresaliendo en punta, y leyó—: «Tenemos entendido que doña Sofía Scales, propietaria de la famosa Pensión Frensham, en la Rue Lord Byron, París —es tan famosa que nadie en las Cinco Ciudades ha oído hablar de ella jamás—, está a punto de hacer una visita a su ciudad natal, Bursley, tras una ausencia de más de treinta años. La señora Scales pertenecía a la conocida y muy respetada familia Baines. Recientemente ha traspasado la Pensión Frensham a una sociedad limitada y no revelamos ningún secreto al afirmar que el precio pagado asciende a cinco cifras». ¡Así que ya lo ve! —comentó el señor Critchlow.

—¿Cómo se entera de las cosas esa gente de la *Señal?* —murmuró Constanza.

—Pues no sé —repuso el señor Critchlow.

Era mentira. Él mismo había revelado la información al nuevo director de la *Señal,* que se había dado cuenta enseguida de la pasión de Critchlow por la prensa y sabía cómo utilizarla.

—Ojalá no hubiera salido precisamente hoy —dijo Constanza.

—¿Por qué?

—¡Oh!, no sé; lo hubiera preferido.

—Bueno; estaré por ahí, señora —concluyó el señor Critchlow, queriendo decir que se marchaba.

Dejó el periódico y bajó los escalones con parsimonia senil. Era típico en él que no hubiera mostrado curiosidad alguna por los detalles de la llegada de Sofía.

Constanza se quitó el delantal, envolvió a *Mancha* en él y lo puso en un extremo del sofá. Luego, repentinamente, mandó a Amy a comprar un horario.

—Creía que iba usted a ir en tranvía a Knype —observó Amy.

—He decidido ir en tren —dijo Constanza con fría dignidad, como si hubiera decidido el destino de las naciones. Detestaba aquellas observaciones de Amy, que por desgracia carecía, en grado creciente, del supremo don de la obediencia ciega.

Cuando regresó Amy sin aliento encontró a Constanza en su habitación, sacando bolas de papel arrugado de las mangas de su segundo mejor abrigo. Casi nunca se lo ponía. En teoría estaba destinado a la iglesia los domingos que llovía; en la práctica, llevaba mucho tiempo sin salir del armario, pues los domingos se había obstinado en hacer buen tiempo durante semanas y semanas seguidas. Era un abrigo que a Constanza nunca le había gustado realmente. Pero no iba a ir Knype a recibir a Sofía con el abrigo de diario, y tampoco tenía intención de ponerse el mejor para aquella excursión. ¡Hacer su primera aparición ante Sofía con el mejor abrigo que tenía..., eso habría sido un lamentable error de táctica! No sólo habría conducido a un anticlímax el domingo, sino que hubiera hecho que Constanza pareciese temer a Sofía; en treinta años, Sofía había llegado quizá a ser alguien, en tanto que Constanza seguía siendo simplemente Constanza. París era un sitio importante y estaba tremendamente lejos. Y ya sólo la mención de ese asunto de la sociedad limitada resultaba intimidante. ¡Y pensar que Sofía había creado por sus propios esfuerzos algo que una sociedad limitada de verdad quería comprar y había comprado! Sí, Constanza sentía temor, pero no pensaba dejarlo ver en su abrigo. Al fin y al cabo, ella era la mayor. Y tenía también su dignidad —y mucha— guardada en su núcleo secreto, escondida dentro de la docilidad de aquel blando exterior. Así que se había decidido por su segundo mejor abrigo, que, al ser poco utilizado, tenía las mangas llenas de papel a fin de que conservaran su forma y su «caída». Las pelotitas de papel estaban esparcidas sobre la cama.

—Hay un tren a las tres menos cuarto; llega a Knype a y diez —dijo oficiosamente Amy—, Pero sólo con que se retrasara tres minutos y el tren de Londres llegara a la hora, lo mismo ya no la encontraba. Sería mejor que tomara el de las dos quince para más seguridad.

—Déjeme ver —dijo Constanza con firmeza—. Por favor, meta todos estos papeles en el armario.

Hubiera preferido no seguir la indicación de Amy, pero era tan indiscutiblemente sensata que se vio obligada a aceptarla.

—A menos que vaya en tranvía —añadió Amy—, Así no tendría que salir tan pronto.

Pero Constanza no quería ir en tranvía. Si tomaba el tranvía, seguro que se encontraba con gente que había leído la *Señal* y le diría: «¿Qué, a Knype a esperar a su hermana?». Y luego vendrían tediosas conversaciones. Mientras que en el tren elegiría un compartimento y sería mucho menos probable que se encontrara con charlatanes.

Ahora no había un minuto que perder. Y la excitación que, en el transcurso de los días anteriores, había ido en aumento en aquella casa, bajo una simulada calma, salió con celeridad a la luz del día con toda desvergüenza. Amy tuvo que ayudar a su señora a ponerse todo lo guapa que era posible sin su vestido, su abrigo y su sombrero mejores. Amy fue consultada francamente en cuanto al efecto. Se bajó durante un tiempo la barrera de la clase. Hacía muchos años que Constanza no había vuelto a tener consciencia de un vivo deseo de estar elegante. Recordó los tiempos en que, luciendo todas sus galas para ir a la iglesia, bajaba corriendo la escalera los domingos por la mañana y, colocándose en actitud de inspección en el umbral de la sala, preguntaba a Samuel: «¿Estoy bien?». ¡Sí, bajaba corriendo la escalera, como una niña, y sin embargo en aquellos tiempos se creía sosegada y madura! Suspiró, sintiendo una mezcla de lancinante añoranza y leve desdén por aquella voluble criatura de menos de treinta años. A los cincuenta y uno se consideraba vieja. Y era vieja. Y Amy tenía los trucos y maneras de una vieja solterona. Así pues, la excitación que reinaba en la casa era una excitación «vieja» y, como el deseo de Constanza de estar elegante, tenía su lado ridículo, que era también su lado trágico, el lado que habría hecho reír a un hombre grosero, a un estúpido histérico llorar y a un sabio meditar tristemente sobre la manera de renovarse de la tierra.

A la una y media, Constanza estaba vestida, con excepción de los guantes. Miró por segunda vez el reloj para asegurarse de que podía echar un vistazo a la casa sin temor a perder el tren. Subió a la habitación del segundo piso, el antiguo dormitorio suyo y de Sofía, que había preparado con enorme cuidado para Sofía.

La ventilación de aquel cuarto había sido una empresa de días, pues, salvo por lo que respecta a un ministro cuando Bursley había sido sede de la Conferencia Metodista Wesleyana, no se había vuelto a ocupar desde la época en la que María Insull dormía alguna que otra vez en la casa. Cyril, en sus visitas, prefería su antigua habitación. Constanza tenía gran cantidad de muebles sólidos y majestuosos; la cámara destinada a Sofía estaba iluminada en todas las esquinas por los reflejos de la caoba pulida. Estaba también impregnada del olor de la pasta para muebles, un olor del que ninguna ama de casa tenía que avergonzarse. Además, se había vuelto a empapelar de un azul delicado, con uno de los nuevos dibujos artísticos. Era una habitación «Baines». Y a Constanza no le importaba de dónde venía Sofía ni a qué cosas estaba acostumbrada, ni en qué sociedad limitada se había transformado: ¡aquella habitación era adecuada! Era imposible mejorarla. No había más que ver la esterillas de crochet, hasta las del lavabo, debajo de la jarra blanco y oro y otros utensilios. Era una estupidez exponer aquellas esterillas a los salpicones de agua de un lavabo, pero una estupidez sublime. Sofía podría quitarlos si lo deseaba. Constanza estaba orgullosa de su casa; el orgullo de su casa estaba dormido en su interior y ahora ardía.

Un fuego iluminaba el salón, que era una estancia verdaderamente espléndida, un museo de objetos valiosos coleccionados por las familias Baines y Maddack desde el año 1840 y atemperados por las últimas novedades en antimacasares y tapicerías. En todo Bursley podía haber cuatro salones comparables con el de Constanza. Constanza lo sabía. No tenía temor alguno de que cualquiera viese su salón.

Entró un momento en su habitación, donde estaba Amy recogiendo pacientemente bolas de papel de la cama.

—Bien, ¿ha entendido todo lo del té? —le preguntó Constanza.

—Oh, sí, señora —repuso Amy, como si dijera «¿cuántas veces me va a hacer esa pregunta?»—. ¿Se va ya, señora?

—Sí —dijo Constanza—. Venga a cerrar la puerta de la calle cuando salga.

Bajaron juntas a la sala. Sobre la mesa había un mantel blanco de té, plegado. Era del damasco más fino que la habilidad podía escoger y el dinero pagar. Tenía quince años y nunca se había usado. Constanza no lo habría sacado para la primera colación de no haber tenido otros dos de igual magnificencia. Sobre el armonio se habían dispuesto varios jamones y pasteles, una empanada de cerdo de Bursley y salmón escabechado, junto con la necesaria plata. Todo estaba allí. Amy no podía equivocarse. En los jarrones de la repisa de la chimenea había azafranes de primavera. ¡Su «jardín», en la expresión que hacía pensar a Samuel lo extraordinariamente femenina que era! Hacía mucho que no tenía un «jardín» en la repisa de la chimenea. Su interés por su ciática crónica y por sus palpitaciones había aumentado a expensas de su interés por los jardines. Muchas veces, cuando había concluido el complicado proceso mediante el cual sus muebles y otros enseres se conservaban como es debido, sólo tenía fuerzas para «descansar». Era una mujer frágil, pequeña y gruesa, que enseguida se quedaba sin aliento y se sentía indispuesta fácilmente. Los trabajos de preparar la llegada de Sofía le habían resultado auténticamente colosales. Sin embargo, los había culminado muy bien. Su salud era bastante buena; sólo estaba un poco cansada, y más que un poco preocupada y nerviosa cuando echó el último vistazo.

—¡Vamos, quite de ahí ese delantal! —dijo a Amy, señalando el mandil basto que había en el extremo del sofá—. Por cierto, ¿dónde está *Mancha?*

—*¿Mancha,* señora? —repitió Amy.

—¡Amy, me sorprende usted! —exclamó trágicamente Constanza. Abrió la puerta.

—¡Bueno, no he visto en la vida cosa como ese perro! —murmuró Amy.

—*¡Mancha!* —llamó Constanza—, Ven aquí ahora mismo. ¿Me oyes?

Mancha apareció de improviso y contempló inmóvil a Constanza. Después sacudió la cabeza, salió disparado hacia la esquina de la Plaza y de nuevo se quedó inmóvil, mirando. Amy salió a cogerlo. Pasado largo rato lo trajo aullando. Su estado era una verdadera ofensa para la vista y para el olfato. Desde luego, se había librado del olor del jabón, que aborrecía. Constanza estuvo a punto de echarse a llorar. En verdad le parecía que nada había salido bien aquel día. Y *Mancha* tenía un aire inocente y confiado. Era imposible hacer que se diera cuenta de que su tía Sofía estaba al llegar. Habría vendido a toda su familia como esclavos para comprar diez metros de arroyo de King Street.

—Tiene usted que lavarlo en el cuarto de fregar; allí hay todo lo necesario —dijo Constanza, dominándose—. Póngase ese delantal y no olvide ponerse uno de los nuevos cuando vaya a abrir la puerta.

Será mejor que lo encierre en la habitación del señorito Cyril cuando lo haya secado.

Y se fue, llena de inquietudes, agarrando el bolso y el paraguas y alisando los guantes y sin dejar de vigilar los pliegues del abrigo.

—¡Qué manera más rara de ir a la estación de Bursley, vaya que sí! —se dijo Amy al ver que Constanza bajaba por King Street en lugar de cruzarla para salir a Wedgwood Street. Y dio a *Mancha* «un buen capón en la cabeza» para indicarle que ahora estaba en su poder.

Constanza se dirigía a la estación dando un rodeo con el fin de que, si la paraba algún conocido, no fuera demasiado evidente que iba hacia allí. Sus sentimientos acerca de la llegada de Sofía y de la actitud de la ciudad hacia ella eran muy complejos.

Tuvo que apresurarse. Y aquella mañana se había levantado con unos planes perfectamente ideados para evitar las prisas. Le desagradaban las prisas porque siempre la «sacaban de quicio».

II

El expreso procedente de Londres llegó con retraso, de modo que Constanza tuvo tres cuartos de hora de la pétrea tranquilidad que luce el andén de Knype cuando aguarda un tren importante. Por fin los mozos de cuerda empezaron a gritar «Tren a Macclesfield, Stockport y Manchester»; la enorme locomotora se deslizó por la curva, haciendo parecer pequeños los vagones que venían tras ella, y Constanza sintió un supremo estremecimiento. La tranquilidad del andén se transformó en un batiburrillo. La pequeña Constanza se vio en el borde de una agitada muchedumbre que al parecer trataba de escalar un precipicio coronado de ventanas y puertas por cuyas aberturas se asomaban los defensores del tren. Daba la impresión de que el andén de Knype nunca iba a poder ser sometido de nuevo al orden. Y Constanza pensó que no tenía muchas posibilidades de distinguir a una Sofía desconocida entre aquel maremágnum. Estaba seriamente preocupada. Todos los músculos de su rostro estaban tensos mientras su mirada vagaba ansiosamente de un extremo al otro del tren.

Al cabo de un momento vio un perro singular. Otras personas lo vieron también. Era de color chocolate; tenía la cabeza y los hombros espesamente cubiertos de pelo, que colgaba formando miles de mechones como los de una moderna mopa de las que se compran en las tiendas. Aquel pelo se interrumpía de improviso bastante antes de la mitad de la longitud del cuerpo, el resto del cual estaba pelado y tan liso como el mármol. Su efecto era dar a los habitantes de las Cinco Ciudades la impresión de que el perro se había olvidado de una parte esencial de su atavío y estaba insultando al decoro. La bola de pelo que se había permitido crecer en la cola y los círculos de pelo que adornaban sus tobillos no hacían sino acentuar la impresión indecorosa. Completaba el insulto una cinta rosa alrededor del cuello. El animal tenía totalmente el aspecto de una mujerzuela endomingada. Una tensa cadena iba del cuello del animal al centro de una pequeña multitud de personas que gesticulaban en tomo a los baúles, y Constanza la siguió hasta una mujer alta y distinguida, con chaqueta y falda y un sombrero notablemente extravagante. ¡Una mujer hermosa y aristocrática, pensó Constanza al verla de lejos! Entonces se le ocurrió la extraña idea: «¡Es Sofía!». Estaba segura... No estaba segura... Estaba segura. La mujer salió de la multitud. Su mirada se detuvo en Constanza. Ambas vacilaron y, por así decirlo, se dirigieron titubeantes la una hacia la otra.

—Te habría conocido en cualquier parte —dijo Sofía, con una calma aparentemente despreocupada, cuando se inclinó para besar a Constanza, levantándose el velo.

Constanza vio que había que imitar aquella maravillosa calma, y la imitó muy bien. Era una tranquilidad «Baines». Pero observó un temblor en los labios de su hermana. Aquel temblor la tranquilizó, al probarle que no era la única tonta. Había además algo raro en las líneas permanentes de la boca de Sofía. Debía de deberse al «ataque» al que se había referido en sus cartas.

—¿Fue Cyril a esperarte? —preguntó Constanza. Fue todo lo que se le ocurrió decir.

—¡Oh, sí! —respondió Sofía con ansiedad—, Y fui a su estudio, *y* me acompañó a Euston. Es un chico muy agradable. Lo quiero mucho.

Dijo «lo quiero mucho» con la entonación de cuando tenía quince años. Su tono y su gesto imperioso hicieron retroceder a Constanza a los años sesenta. «No ha cambiado nada —pensó con alegría—. No hay nada

que pueda hacer cambiar a Sofía». Y detrás de aquella idea había una más general: «No hay nada que pueda hacer cambiar a una Baines». Era verdad que la Sofía de Constanza no había cambiado. Las personalidades fuertes no se desfiguran sean cuales fueren las vicisitudes que sufran. Tras esta revelación de la Sofía original, brotada de sus elogios a Cyril, Constanza se sintió más cómoda y tranquila.

—Ésta es *Fossette* —dijo Sofía, tirando de la correa.

Constanza no supo qué contestar. Desde luego, Sofía no podía saber lo que hacía trayendo un perro como aquél a un sitio donde la gente era tan especial como lo es en las Cinco Ciudades.

—*¡Fossette!* —repitió el nombre en tono afectuoso, inclinándose hacia la perrita. Al fin y al cabo, ésta no tenía la culpa. Sofía había mencionado un perro en sus cartas, pero no había preparado a Constanza para el espectáculo de *Fossette.*

Todo aquello sucedió en un momento. Apareció un mozo de cuerda con dos baúles pertenecientes a Sofía. Constanza reparó en que eran unos baúles superlativamente «buenos»; también en que la ropa que llevaba Sofía, aunque «del tipo ostentoso», era superlativamente «buena». A continuación las ocupó el sacar un billete a Bursley para Sofía y pronto había pasado la primera conmoción del encuentro.

En un compartimento de segunda del tren circular, con Sofía y *Fossette* frente a ella, Constanza tuvo tiempo para «asimilar» a Sofía. Llegó a la conclusión de que, a pesar de estar delgada y erguida y del alargado óvalo de su rostro bajo el sombrero, a Sofía se le notaban los años. Veía que sin duda había pasado mucho: sus experiencias estaban dañosamente impresas en los detalles de sus rasgos. Vista a distancia, podría pasar por una mujer de treinta años, incluso por una muchacha, pero desde el otro lado de un estrecho vagón de tren era una mujer avejentada por los sufrimientos. Sin embargo, era evidente que su espíritu no había sido quebrantado. ¡Había que oírla diciendo a un mozo vacilante que por supuesto que iba a llevar consigo a *Fossette* en el vagón! ¡Había que verla cerrar la puerta del compartimento con la intención expresa de que no entrase nadie más! Estaba acostumbrada a mandar. Y al mismo tiempo había en su rostro una sonrisa casi fija, como si se dijera: «Me moriré sonriendo». A Constanza le dio pena. Aunque reconocía en Sofía a alguien superior a ella misma en encanto, en experiencia, en conocimiento del mundo y en fuerza de personalidad, le daba pena y sentía una especie de serena superioridad fundamental.

—¿Qué te parece? —dijo Sofía, jugueteando distraídamente con *Fossette*— En Euston, mientras Cyril iba por mi billete, se me acercó un hombre y me dijo: «Eh, señorita Baines, no la he visto desde hace treinta años, pero sé que es usted la señorita Baines, o lo *era,* y qué guapa está». Después se fue. Creo que era Holl, el tendero.

—¿Tenía barba blanca y larga?

—Sí.

—Entonces era el señor Holl. Ha sido alcalde dos veces. Es concejal, ¿sabes?

—¿De veras? —exclamó Sofía—, Pero ¿no fue una cosa rara?

—¡Ay! ¡Válgame Dios! ¡No me hables de cosas raras! Es terrible cómo pasa el tiempo.

La conversación se interrumpió y se negó a empezar de nuevo. Dos mujeres que están llenas de afectuosa curiosidad la una por la otra, que llevan treinta años sin verse y que están ansiosas de confiarse la una a la otra no deberían encontrar ninguna dificultad para hablar, pero, por alguna razón, no podían hacerlo. Constanza vio que Sofía se sentía igual de violenta que ella.

—¡Es increíble! —exclamó de pronto Sofía. Al mirar por la ventanilla había visto dos camellos y un elefante en un campo cercano a la vía, entre manufacturas, almacenes y anuncios de jabón.

—¡Oh! —dijo Sofía—. Es el circo Barnum, ya sabes. Tienen lo que llaman un almacén central, porque esto es el centro de Inglaterra. —Constanza hablaba en tono de orgullo. (Al fin y al cabo, no puede haber más que un centro). Le faltó poco para decir, en su estilo «ácido», que *Fossette* tendría que estar con los camellos, pero se contuvo. A Sofía se le ocurrió la excelente idea de observar todos los edificios que eran nuevos para ella y todos los rasgos que recordaba. Era sorprendente lo poco que había cambiado la región.

—¡El humo de siempre! —dijo Sofía.

—¡El humo de siempre! —coincidió Constanza.

—Está todavía peor —prosiguió Sofía.

—¿Tú crees? —Constanza estaba un poco picada—. Pero ahora están haciendo algo para disminuirlo.

—¡Se me debe de haber olvidado lo sucio que estaba! —dijo Sofía—. Me imagino que es así. ¡No tenía ni idea...!

—¿De veras? —inquirió Constanza. Luego, admitiéndolo con franqueza—: La verdad es que sí que está sucio. No te puedes imaginar cómo se pone todo, sobre todo las cortinas.

Cuando el tren pasó humeando bajo Trafalgar Road, Constanza señaló una estación nueva que estaban construyendo allí y que se llamaría «Estación de Trafalgar Road».

—¿A que se va a hacer raro? —dijo, acostumbrada a la eterna secuencia de las estaciones de la línea circular: Tumhill, Bursley, Bleakridge, Hanbridge, Cauldon, Knype, Trent Vale y Longshaw.

Un «Trafalgar Road» insertándose entre Bleakridge y Hanbridge le resultaba en extremo curioso.

—Sí, supongo que sí —repuso Sofía.

—Pero, claro, para ti no es lo mismo —dijo Constanza con osadía. Señaló con modestia las glorias de Bursley Park, mientras el tren reducía la marcha para entrar en Bursley. Sofía miró al exterior y reconoció vagamente las laderas por donde había dado su primer paseo con Gerald Scales.

Nadie las esperaba en la estación de Bursley; fueron a casa en un coche de alquiler. Amy estaba en la ventana, sosteniendo a *Mancha,* cuya limpieza era tal que rivalizaba con el inmaculado delantal de Amy.

—Buenas tardes, señora —dijo oficiosamente a Sofía cuando ésta subió los escalones.

—Buenas tardes, Amy —respondió Sofía. Halagó a Amy al hacerle ver que sabía cómo se llamaba, pero si alguna vez han puesto a un sirviente en su sitio simplemente por el tono, así le sucedió a Amy en aquella ocasión. A Constanza le hizo temblar la gélida y arrogante cortesía de Sofía. Lo cierto era que ésta no estaba acostumbrada a que las criadas le hablasen primero. Pero Amy no era exactamente una criada corriente. Era mucho mayor que una criada corriente y había adquirido un parcial dominio moral sobre Constanza, aunque ésta lo habría negado con energía. De aquí la aprensión de Constanza. Sin embargo, no ocurrió nada. Al parecer, Amy no percibió el desaire.

—Llévese a *Mancha* y métalo en la habitación del señorito Cyril —le murmuró Constanza, como si quisiera decir «¿No le he dicho ya que hiciera eso?». La verdad era que temía por la vida de *Mancha.*

—¡Vamos, *Fossette!* —Hizo pasar amablemente al caniche, que de inmediato empezó a olisquear.

El grueso y rojo cochero estaba trasteando con los baúles en la acera y Amy estaba arriba. Durante un momento, las dos hermanas se quedaron solas en la sala.

—¡Pues ya estoy aquí! —dijo la alta y majestuosa mujer de cincuenta años. E hizo una mueca al recorrer con la mirada la estancia, que le parecía muy pequeña.

—¡Sí, aquí estás! —asintió Constanza. Se mordió los labios y, como medida de prudencia para evitar derrumbarse, volvió apresuradamente junto al cochero. ¡Un pasajero instante de emoción, como una salpicadura de espuma en un vasto mar tranquilo!

El cochero daba tumbos por la escalera, subiendo y bajando; alabó la altiva generosidad de Constanza y luego se hizo el silencio. Amy estaba ya haciendo el té en la cueva. La mesa de té, dispuesta delante de la chimenea, ofrecía un espectáculo centelleante.

—Bueno, ¿qué hacemos con *Fossette?* —Constanza expresó las preocupaciones que habían ido creciendo en su interior.

—*Fossette* estará perfectamente conmigo —dijo Sofía con firmeza.

Subieron a la habitación de los huéspedes, que despertó la admiración de Sofía por lo bonita que era. Corrió a la ventana y contempló la Plaza.

—¿Quieres que se encienda el fuego? —le preguntó Constanza como por cumplir. Encender la chimenea en un dormitorio, en épocas de salud normal, seguía considerándose absurdo en la Plaza.

—¡Oh, no! —exclamó Sofía, pero no consiguió del todo rechazar la sugerencia como algo completamente ridículo.

—¿Seguro? —insistió Constanza.

—Completamente, gracias —repuso su hermana.

—Bien, te dejo. Espero que Amy tenga ya preparado el té. —Bajó a la cocina—. Amy —dijo—, en cuanto haya terminado con el té, encienda el fuego en la habitación de la señora Scales.

—¿En la habitación de arriba, señora?

—Sí.

Constanza subió a su habitación *y cenó* la puerta. Necesitaba un momento para sí, en medio de su tremendo apuro. Suspiró aliviada al quitarse el abrigo. Pensó: «Sea como fuere, nos hemos encontrado y la tengo aquí. Es muy agradable. No, no ha cambiado nada». Vaciló en admitir que, para ella, Sofía no tenía nada de imponente. Y se dijo una vez más: «Es muy agradable. No ha cambiado nada». En su extrema sencillez, a Constanza no se le ocurrió hacerse cábalas sobre lo que Sofía pensaba de ella.

Sofía bajó la primera y Constanza la encontró mirando a la pared lisa que había pasada la puerta que conducía a las escaleras de la cocina.

—Entonces, ¿es ahí donde tapiaste? —preguntó.

—Sí —repuso Constanza—, Ése es el lugar.

—¡Me da una sensación como cuando alguien nota un cosquilleo en un miembro que le han cortado! —dijo Sofía.

—¡Oh, Sofía!

El té fue objeto de muchas alabanzas por parte de Sofía, pero ninguna de las dos comió mucho. Constanza vio que Sofía era la misma de siempre: seguía comiendo como un pájaro. Probaba exquisiteces por probarlas, pero no hacía más que picotear. No se consumió ni la duodécima parte del té. No se atrevieron a darse caprichos. Sólo comían con los ojos.

Después del té subieron al salón; en el pasillo tuvieron el gusto de ver dos perros que correteaban uno tras otro amistosamente. *Mancha* había encontrado a *Fossette,* con ayuda del incorregible descuido de Amy, y al momento la había inspeccionado con todo detalle. La perrita parecía de talante amistoso y no era reacia a las distracciones ligeras. Durante largo rato las dos hermanas estuvieron charlando en el iluminado salón, teniendo como fondo el grato ruido de unos perros contentos jugando en el oscuro corredor. Los animales salvaron la situación, porque requerían una atención constante. Cuando se adormilaron, las hermanas se pusieron a repasar álbumes de fotos, de los que Constanza tenía varios, encuadernados en felpa o tafilete. No hay nada que refresque la memoria, evoque el pasado, resucite a los muertos, rejuvenezca a los viejos y cause suspiros y sonrisas como una colección de fotografías reunidas a lo largo de muchos años. Constanza tenía una asombrosa serie de primos desconocidos, junto con sus parientes, y a gente de la ciudad; tenía a Cyril a todas las edades; tenía raros daguerrotipos de sus padres. El más extraño de todos era un retrato de Samuel Povey de bebé. Sofía reprimió un impulso de echarse a reír al verlo. Pero cuando Constanza dijo: «¿A que es gracioso?» se permitió la risa. Había una fotografía de Samuel, de un año antes de su muerte, en verdad imponente. Sofía la contempló, impresionada. Era el retrato de un hombre honrado.

—¿Cuánto hace que eres viuda? —preguntó Constanza en voz baja, mirando a la erguida Sofía por encima de las gafas, con una hoja del álbum apoyada en el dedo.

Sofía se ruborizó de manera inconfundible.

—No sé si soy viuda —dijo— Mi marido me dejó en 1870, y no lo he visto ni he sabido nada de él desde entonces.

—¡Oh, querida! —exclamó Constanza, alarmada y ensordecida como por acción de un espantoso trueno—. Pensaba que eras viuda. El señor Peel-Swynnerton me dijo que estaba seguro de que lo eras. Por eso yo nunca... —Se detuvo. Tenía una expresión confusa.

—Por supuesto, allí siempre he pasado por viuda.

—Por supuesto —dijo rápidamente Constanza—. Ya veo...

—Y tal vez lo sea —concluyó Sofía.

Constanza no hizo observación alguna. Aquello era un golpe. Bursley era un lugar muy peculiar. Sin duda, Gerald Scales se había portado como un canalla. ¡Eso estaba claro!

Cuando, acto seguido, Amy abrió la puerta del salón (habiendo llamado primero: en aquella casa nunca se había dado alas al hábito de animar a una criada a meterse de golpe en un salón sin aviso previo de ningún género) vio a las dos hermanas sentadas una cerca de la otra a la mesa ovalada de nogal, la señora Scales muy derecha, con la vista clavada en el fuego, y la señora Povey «recogida» y mirando el álbum de fotos; a Amy le parecieron las dos muy envejecidas y temerosas; el cabello de la señora Povey era totalmente gris, aunque el de la señora Scales era casi tan negro como el de la propia Amy. La señora Scales se sobresaltó al oír llamar y volvió la cabeza.

—Están aquí el señor y la señora Critchlow, señora —anunció Amy.

Las hermanas se miraron, levantando la frente. Luego, la señora Povey habló a Amy como si recibir visitas a las ocho y media de la noche fuera un fenómeno corriente en la casa. No obstante, temblaba de pensar qué cosas ofensivas podía decir el señor Critchlow a Sofía después de treinta años de ausencia. La ocasión era grandiosa y podría también ser terrible.

—Dígales que suban —ordenó calmosamente.

Pero Amy jugaba con ventaja.

—Ya lo he hecho —replicó, y al instante los extrajo de la oscuridad del pasillo. Fue providencial: las hermanas no habían hecho ninguna observación que los Critchlow no debieran oír.

Luego, María Critchlow, sonriendo tontamente, tuvo que saludar a Sofía. La señora Critchlow estaba muy agitada, de puro nerviosismo. Hacía corvetas, casi daba brincos, y producía ruidos con la boca como si viera a alguien comiéndose una manzana árida. Quería hacer ver a Sofía cuán diferente era de aquella joven y tímida aprendiza. En verdad había cambiado desde su matrimonio. Cuando gestionaba un negocio ajeno no sentía la necesidad de ser efusiva con los clientes, pero, como propietaria, la ansiedad por triunfar la había sacado a rastras de su indiferencia eficaz y mecánica. Era una lástima. Su permanente sosería poseía una especie de dignidad, pero cordial estaba simplemente ridícula. La animación exhibía cruelmente su terrible vulgaridad y su aspecto gastado. El comportamiento de Sofía no era gélido, pero indicaba que no tenía ningún deseo de ser observada como si fuese un fenómeno de la naturaleza.

El señor Critchlow entró muy despacio en la habitación.

—Sigues llevando la cabeza bien alta —dijo, examinando a Sofía con atención. Después, con mucho cuidado, extendió su brazo largo y delgado y tomó su mano—: ¡Bien, me alegro muchísimo de verte!

Todo el mundo se quedó atónito al oír aquella expresión de contento. Jamás se había sabido que el señor Critchlow se alegrase de ver a nadie.

—Sí —empezó a cotorrear María—, El señor Critchlow quería venir esta noche. No había manera de hacerle cambiar de idea.

—No me dijo esta tarde —terció Constanza —que iba a darnos el placer de su compañía.

Él miró un momento a Constanza.

—No —chirrió—; no sé si lo dije.

Su mirada halagó a Sofía. Era evidente que trataba a aquella experimentada y entristecida mujer de cincuenta años como si fuese una chiquilla. Y ante la avanzada edad de él se sentía como una chiquilla, recordando al mismo tiempo cuánto lo había aborrecido. Rechazando la ayuda de su mujer, puso un sillón delante de la chimenea y se instaló meticulosamente en él. Sin duda era mucho más viejo en un salón que detrás del mostrador de su tienda. Constanza lo había notado por la tarde. Cayó fuera de la chimenea un ascua encendida. Él se inclinó, se humedeció los dedos, cogió el ascua y la volvió a echar al fuego.

—Bueno —dijo Sofía—; yo no lo hubiera hecho.

—Nunca he visto a nadie como el señor Critchlow para coger ascuas calientes —replicó María con una

risita.

El señor Critchlow no se dignó hacer comentario alguno.

—¿Cuándo saliste de ese París? —interrogó a Sofía, apoyándose en el respaldo y poniendo las manos en los brazos del sillón.

—Ayer por la mañana —contestó Sofía.

—¿Y qué has hecho desde ayer por la mañana?

—Pasé la noche en Londres.

—Oh, ¿en Londres?

—Sí. Cyril y yo pasamos la tarde juntos.

—¿Eh? ¡Cyril! ¿Qué opinión tienes de Cyril, Sofía?

—Estoy muy orgullosa de que sea mi sobrino —afirmó Sofía.

—¡Oh! ¿De veras? —El tono del anciano era evidentemente irónico.

—Sí, lo estoy —insistió Sofía, cortante—. No pienso escuchar una palabra que se diga contra Cyril.

Se embarcó en una entusiasta alabanza de Cyril que dejó abrumada a su madre. Constanza estaba complacida; estaba encantada.

Y sin embargo, en algún rincón de su mente albergaba la incómoda sensación de que Cyril, encaprichado con su brillante tía, había tratado de fascinarla como raras veces o nunca había tratado de fascinar a su madre. Cyril y Sofía se habían deslumbrado y conquistado recíprocamente; eran del mismo tipo, mientras que ella, Constanza, que no era más que una persona sencilla, era incapaz de centellear.

Tocó la campanilla y dio instrucciones a Amy sobre cosas de comer: pasteles de fruta, café y leche caliente, en una bandeja; Sofía se dirigió también a Amy murmurando una petición relativa a *Fossette*.

—Sí, señora Scales —dijo Amy con ansiosa deferencia.

La señora Critchlow sonreía vagamente desde una silla baja, cerca de la ventana, que tenía las cortinas corridas. Constanza encendió otro quemador de la araña. Al hacerlo dejó escapar un leve suspiro; era un suspiro de alivio. El señor Critchlow se había comportado. Ahora que él y Sofía se habían encontrado, lo peor había pasado. Si Constanza hubiera sabido de antemano que iría a hacerles una visita, habría estado medio muerta de temor, pero ahora que había venido estaba contenta de que lo hubiese hecho.

Tras tomar leche caliente en silencio, sacó de su abultado bolsillo un grueso fajo de papeles, blancos y azules.

—Y ahora, María Critchlow —dijo, volviéndose ligeramente en su sillón—, lo mejor será que te vayas a casa.

María Critchlow estaba mordiendo un trozo de pastel de nueces, mientras en la mano derecha, toda llena de líneas negras, sostenía una taza de café.

—¡Pero, señor Critchlow...! —protestó Constanza.

—Tengo que hablar de negocios con Sofía y ha de hacerse. He venido para rendir cuentas a Sofía de mi administración, con arreglo al testamento de su padre, y del testamento de su madre, y del testamento de su tía, y no es asunto de nadie excepto mío y de Sofía, creo yo. ¡Así que —echó una mirada a su mujer— lárgate!

María se levantó, medio juguetona y medio avergonzada.

—¡No querrá tratar de todo eso esta noche! —dijo Sofía. Hablaba con voz suave, pues ya se había dado cuenta plenamente de que era preciso manejar al señor Critchlow con el tacto que exigían las caprichosas obstinaciones de la edad avanzada—. Seguro que puede esperar uno o dos días. No tengo ninguna prisa.

—¿No he esperado ya bastante? —replicó con fiereza.

Se produjo una pausa. María Critchlow se movió.

—En cuanto a que no tengas ninguna prisa, Sofía —prosiguió el anciano—, nadie puede decir que la hayas tenido.

Aquello dejó cortada a Sofía, que miró vacilante a Constanza.

—La señora Critchlow y yo bajaremos a la sala —dijo Constanza con prontitud—. Hay fuego allí.

—Oh, no. ¡Ni pensarlo!

—Sí, vamos, ¿no, señora Critchlow? —insistió Constanza, animadamente pero con firmeza. Estaba decidida a que en su casa Sofía tuviera toda la libertad y las comodidades que pudiera tener en la suya. Si hacía falta una habitación privada para las conversaciones entre ella y su fideicomisario, para ella era cuestión de orgullo proporcionarla. Además, Constanza se alegraba de quitar a María de la vista de su hermana. Ella estaba acostumbrada a María; con ella no importaba, pero no tenía ganas de que a Sofía le diese dentera el ridículo comportamiento de María. De modo que las dos salieron del salón y el anciano empezó a abrir los papeles que llevaba semanas preparando.

Había muy poco fuego en la sala y Constanza, además de aburrirse con las inanes e inquisitivas observaciones de la señora Critchlow, tenía frío, lo cual era malo para su ciática. Se preguntaba si Sofía tendría que confesar al señor Critchlow que no era viuda con toda seguridad. Pensaba que habría que tomar medidas para ver de averiguar algo, a través de los Birkinshaw, sobre Gerald Scales. Pero incluso este camino estaba erizado de peligros. ¡Y si aún vivía, aquel villano indescriptible (Constanza sólo podía pensar en él como un villano indescriptible), y si molestaba a Sofía!... ¡Qué escenas! ¡Qué vergüenza en la ciudad! Aquellos terribles pensamientos cruzaban sin cesar la mente de Constanza mientras se inclinaba sobre el fuego intentando mantener viva una conversación tonta con María Critchlow.

Amy atravesó la sala para irse a dormir. No había otra manera de llegar a la parte alta de la casa.

—¿Te vas a dormir, Amy?

—Sí, señora.

—¿Dónde está *Fossette?*

—En la cocina, señora —dijo Amy, defendiéndose—. La señora Scales me dijo que la perra podía dormir en la cocina con *Mancha,* ya que eran tan buenos amigos. He abierto el cajón de abajo y *Fossette* se ha acostado allí.

—¡La señora Scales se ha traído un perro! —exclamó María.

—¡Sí, señora! —dijo Amy secamente, antes de que Constanza pudiera responder. En aquella afirmación lo expresaba todo.

—Son ustedes una familia aficionada a los perros —dijo María—, ¿Qué clase de perro es?

—Bueno —respondió Constanza—, no sé exactamente cómo lo llaman. Es un perro francés, uno de esos perros franceses —Amy remoloneaba al pie de la escalera—. Buenas noches, Amy; gracias.

Amy subió y cerró la puerta.

—¡Oh! ¡Ya veo! —musitó María—, ¡Es increíble!

Pasaban de las diez cuando los ruidos de arriba indicaron que la primera entrevista entre fideicomisario y beneficiaría había concluido.

—Me adelantaré a abrir nuestra puerta lateral —dijo María—. Dé las buenas noches a la señora Scales de mi parte. —No estaba segura de si Charles Critchlow deseaba realmente que se fuera a casa o se habría conformado con que simplemente se ausentara del salón. De manera que se fue. Él bajó la escalera con tediosa lentitud, cruzó la sala en silencio, sin hacer caso de Constanza ni de Sofía, que venía tras él, y desapareció.

Cuando Constanza cerró la puerta de la calle y echó el cerrojo, las dos hermanas se miraron; Sofía sonrió con desmayo. Les pareció que se entendían mejor cuando no hablaban. Con una rápida mirada se comunicaron sus ideas en relación con el tema de Charles Critchlow y María y averiguaron que sus ideas era similares. Constanza no dijo nada de la entrevista privada. Tampoco lo hizo Sofía. De momento, aquel primer

día, sólo podían llegar a la intimidad en destellos intermitentes.

—¿Nos vamos a dormir? —inquirió Sofía.

—Debes de estar cansada —repuso Constanza.

Sofía subió la escalera, un poco iluminada por el gas del pasillo, antes de que Constanza, después de comprobar el cierre de la ventana, apagara el gas de la sala. Subieron juntas el primer tramo de escalones.

—Tengo que ver si todo está como es debido en tu habitación —dijo Constanza.

—¿De veras? —sonrió Sofía.

Subieron despacio el segundo tramo. Constanza estaba sin aliento.

—¡Oh, está el fuego encendido! ¡Qué agradable! —exclamó Sofía—. Pero ¿por qué te has tomado tantas molestias? Te dije que no lo hicieras.

—No es ninguna molestia —dijo Constanza, aumentando el gas de la habitación. Su tono insinuaba que las chimeneas encendidas en los dormitorios constituían un incidente del todo habitual en la vida cotidiana de un lugar como Bursley.

—Bueno, querida, espero que lo encuentres todo a tu gusto —dijo Constanza.

—Estoy segura de que sí. Buenas noches, querida.

—Buenas noches, pues.

Se miraron de nuevo con tímido afecto. No se dieron un beso. Las dos estaban pensando: «No podemos estar dándonos besos todos los días». Pero había en su tono mucho afecto tranquilo y contenido, una gran confianza y respeto mutuos, incluso ternura.

Cosa de media hora después hirió los oídos de Constanza un jaleo espantoso. En aquel momento estaba metiéndose en la cama. Escuchó atentamente, muy alarmada. Sin duda eran los perros peleándose, y a muerte. Se imaginó la cocina hecha un campo de batalla y a *Mancha* muerto. Abrió la puerta y salió al pasillo.

—Constanza —dijo una voz por encima de ella. Dio un brinco —. ¿Eres tú?

—Sí.

—Bien, no te molestes en bajar a ver a los perros; enseguida pararán. *Fossette* no muerde. Siento mucho que haya causado este trastorno.

Constanza miró hacia arriba y distinguió una pálida sombra. Los perros cesaron pronto en su altercado. Aquel breve coloquio en las tinieblas afectó extrañamente a Constanza.

III

A la mañana siguiente, tras una noche en la que alternaron períodos de vigilia no desagradables, Sofía se levantó, tomando las debidas precauciones para no enfriarse, y se acercó a la ventana. Era sábado; había salido de París el jueves. Descorrió la cortina y contempló la Plaza. Se esperaba, desde luego, que ésta hubiera disminuido de tamaño, pero con todo se sorprendió de ver lo pequeña que era. Le parecía apenas mayor que un patio. Recordaba una mañana de invierno en la que, desde la ventana, había estado contemplando la Plaza cubierta de nieve virgen a la luz de las farolas; era extensa, y el primer viandante, que la cruzó en diagonal dejando las irregulares huellas de sus pies, parecía llevar horas viajando por un interminable desierto blanco antes de desaparecer, dejando atrás la tienda de Holl, en dirección al ayuntamiento. Recordaba sobre todo la Plaza nevada; las mañanas frías y la frialdad del hule de la ventana, y la corriente de aire gélido que entraba por el postigo que ajustaba mal (ahora estaba arreglado). Aquellas visiones de sí misma le parecían bellas; su existencia infantil le parecía bella; las tormentas y tempestades de su primera juventud le parecían bellas, incluso la gran extensión estéril de tedio de la época en la que, tras renunciar a una carrera escolar, había

estado dos años trabajando en la tienda: hasta esto poseía un extraño encanto en su memoria.

Y pensó que ni por millones de libras volvería a vivir su vida.

En cuanto a su contenido, la Plaza, sorprendentemente, no había cambiado durante el enorme y aterrador intervalo que la separaba de su virginidad. En el lado este se habían unido varias tiendas en una, y se las había obligado a ofrecer una semblanza de eterna unidad por medio de una capa de estuco. Y en el lado norte había una fuente que era una novedad para ella. ¡No había ningún otro cambio de carácter constructivo! Pero el cambio moral, la triste decadencia desde el que fuera orgulloso espíritu de la Plaza..., esto era dolorosamente deprimente. Había varios establecimientos sin arrendatario, visiblemente desde hacía largo tiempo. Había carteles de «Se alquila» colgados de sus ventanas altas, sucias y mugrientas o inseguramente adheridos a sus postigos cerrados. Y en los rótulos de esos establecimientos había nombres desconocidos para Sofía. El carácter de la mayoría de las tiendas parecía haber ido a peor; se habían convertido en pequeños y mezquinos agujeros descuidados, deslucidos, pobres; sin alegría ni sensación de vitalidad. Y el suelo de la Plaza estaba cubierto de indefinidos desperdicios. Toda la escena, mísera, limitada y monótona, era a sus ojos el colmo del provincianismo. Era lo que los franceses llamaban, con elocuente entonación, *la province.* Una vez dicho esto, no había nada más que decir. Bursley, desde luego, se hallaba en provincias; era algo natural que Bursley tuviera que ser típicamente provinciana. ¡Pero, en su fuero interno, siempre se había diferenciado de la *province* corriente; siempre había tenido un aire, una distinción, y sobre todo la Plaza de San Lucas! Ahora aquella ilusión se había desvanecido. Sin embargo, el cambio no estaba totalmente en ella; no era totalmente subjetivo. La Plaza verdaderamente había cambiado para peor; tal vez no fuera más pequeña, pero se había deteriorado. Como centro de comercio estaba sin duda muy cerca de la muerte. Una mañana de sábado, treinta años antes, habría estado llena de tenderetes entoldados, campesinos charlando y la agitación de los regateos. Ahora, la mañana del sábado era como cualquier otra mañana en la Plaza; el tejado de cristal del mercado de San Lucas, en Wedgwood Street, que veía desde la ventana, resonaba con los ecos del ruidoso comercio. En ese ejemplo, el comercio se había limitado a trasladarse unos pocos metros al este, pero Sofía sabía, por insinuaciones de las cartas de Constanza y por lo que había hablado con ella, que el negocio en general se había trasladado más que unos pocos metros; se había trasladado un par de kilómetros: al arrogante y avasallador Hanbridge, con su luz eléctrica, sus teatros y sus grandes tiendas llenas de publicidad. La cúpula de espeso humo sobre la Plaza, la negra capa que cubría la carpintería pintada, el ulular intermitente de las sirenas de vapor, mostraban que el comercio mayorista de Bursley aún era próspero. Pero Sofía no recordaba el comercio mayorista de Bursley; no significaba nada para la juventud de su corazón; la unían íntimos lazos al comercio minorista de Bursley, y como mercado el viejo Bursley estaba acabado.

Pensó: «Me moriría si tuviera que vivir aquí. Es opresivo. Resulta agobiante. ¡Y esa suciedad, y esa horrible fealdad! ¡Y cómo hablan, y cómo piensan! Lo noté primero en la estación de Knype. La Plaza es muy pintoresca, pero ¡es una birria! ¡Mira que tener que verla cada mañana, toda la vida! ¡No!». —Casi tembló.

En aquellos momentos no tenía hogar. Con Constanza estaba «de visita».

Constanza no parecía darse cuenta de las espantosas condiciones de suciedad, deterioro y provincianismo en que vivía. Hasta la casa de Constanza era extremadamente incómoda, oscura y sin duda insalubre. Una cocina como un sótano; sin recibidor; una escalera abominable, y, por lo que atañe a la higiene, sencillamente medieval. No podía comprender cómo Constanza se había quedado en aquella casa. Tenía mucho dinero y podría vivir donde quisiera, y en una buena casa moderna. Sin embargo se quedaba en la Plaza. «Me imagino que se habrá acostumbrado —pensó Sofía con indulgencia—. Me imagino que a mí me hubiera ocurrido lo mismo en su lugar». Pero en realidad no lo pensaba y seguía sin entender el estado de ánimo de Constanza.

Cierto era que no podía afirmar todavía que hubiera entendido a Constanza. Consideraba que su hermana era, en algunos aspectos, totalmente provinciana, lo que llamaban en las Cinco Ciudades «un tipo». Un tanto excesivamente insegura, no lo bastante enérgica, no lo bastante erguida; con curiosas pronunciaciones, acentos, gestos y amaneramientos provincianos y exclamaciones inarticuladas, con unos puntos de vista curiosamente estrechos. Pero, al mismo tiempo, Constanza era muy astuta, y muchas veces demostraba con alguna pequeña observación que sabía qué era qué, a pesar de su provincianismo. En sus juicios sobre la naturaleza humana indudablemente pensaban lo mismo; había entre ellas, por naturaleza, una profunda sintonía general. Y Constanza tenía buen fondo. A intervalos, Sofía descubrió que adoptaba una actitud protectora hacia Constanza, pero la reflexión siempre hacía que dejase de ser protectora y examinase sus propias defensas. Constanza, además de ser la esencia de la amabilidad, no era ninguna tonta. Podía calar un fingimiento, un absurdo, tan rápidamente como cualquiera. A Sofía le parecía, con toda franqueza, superior a cualquier francesa que hubiese conocido. Hallaba en ella, en su más alto grado, la cualidad que había reconocido en los mozos de cuerda de Newhaven al desembarcar: una buena voluntad honrada e ingenua, una poderosa sencillez. Esa cualidad se le presentaba como la más grande del mundo y le daba la impresión de estar en el mismo aire de Inglaterra. La podía captar incluso en el señor Critchlow, quien, por lo

demás, le agradaba, y de cuyo carácter admiraba la fuerza brutal. Le perdonaba su brutalidad para con su esposa. La encontraba apropiada. «Al fin y al cabo —se dijo—, si no se hubiese casado con esa mujer, ¿qué habría sido ella? ¡Nada más que una esclava! Vive infinitamente mejor siendo su esposa. En realidad ha tenido suerte. Y sería absurdo que él la tratara de otra manera». (Sofía no adivinaba que su autoritario Critchlow había deseado antaño a María como se pudiera desear una estrella.)

¡Pero estar siempre con aquella gente! ¡Estar siempre con Constanza! ¡Estar siempre en la atmósfera de Bursley, física y mental!

Imaginó París tal como estaría aquella misma mañana: alegre, limpio, centelleante; la pulcritud de la Rue Lord Byron y el magnífico esplendor de los Campos Elíseos. París siempre le había parecido una hermosa ciudad, pero no la vida de París. Sin embargo, ahora sí que le parecía hermosa. Podía escarbar en los años en que había sido la propietaria de la pensión y veía una belleza plácida, regular, en su vida diaria en ella. Su vida en ella, hasta sólo dos semanas antes, le pareció hermosa; triste, pero hermosa. Había pasado a la historia. Suspiró al pensar en las innumerables entrevistas con Mardon, en las interminables formalidades del sindicato. Había pasado por todo aquello. Realmente había pasado por aquello y se había terminado. Había comprado la pensión por casi nada y la había vendido por una fortuna. Había pasado de no ser nadie a ser la deseada de los sindicatos. Y tras largos, monótonos y agotadores años de posesión había llegado el día, había llegado el momento emocional en que había cedido las llaves de la propiedad al señor Mardon y a un empleado del Hotel Moscú, había pagado por última vez a sus criadas y había firmado la última factura con recibo. Los hombres habían sido muy galantes y le habían rogado que se quedase en la pensión como su invitada hasta que hubiese preparado su marcha de París. Pero no había aceptado. Nada la habría llevado a permanecer en la pensión bajo el reinado de otro. Se había ido inmediatamente a un hotel con sus escasos bienes mientras acababa de resolver algunas cuestiones financieras. Y una tarde había ido Jacqueline a verla y se había echado a llorar.

Su salida de la Pensión Frensham le producía ahora una impresión conmovedoramente patética por su celeridad y su ausencia de ceremonia. Diez pasos y su trayectoria había concluido, se había cerrado. ¡Era asombroso con qué líquida ternura se había vuelto a contemplar aquella vida en París, tan dura, tan llena de lucha, tan agotadora! Pues, si bien inconscientemente le había gustado, nunca había disfrutado de ella. Siempre había comparado a Francia con Inglaterra en desventaja de aquélla; siempre le había desagradado el temperamento francés en los negocios; siempre había estado convencida de que con los comerciantes franceses «nunca sabe uno a qué atenerse». Y ahora pasaban fugazmente ante ella dotados de un maravilloso encanto, tan corteses en su forma de mentir, tan ansiosos por no herir los sentimientos ajenos y por tranquilizar a la gente, tan pulcros y tan correctos. ¡Y las tiendas francesas, tan exquisitamente ordenadas! Hasta una carnicería era en París un placer para la vista, mientras que la carnicería de Wedgwood Street, que recordaba de antiguo y de la que había tenido una vislumbre desde el coche..., ¡qué colección de despojos sangrientos! De nuevo anhelaba París. Anhelaba respirar a pleno pulmón en París. Aquellas gentes de Bursley no se figuraban lo que era París. No apreciaban ni apreciarían jamás las maravillas que ella había realizado en un teatro de las maravillas. Probablemente nunca se dieron cuenta de que el resto del mundo no era más o menos como Bursley. No tenían curiosidad alguna. Incluso Constanza estaba mil veces más interesada en contar insignificancias del chismorreo de Bursley que en escuchar detalles de la vida en París. De vez en cuando había expresado una leve e insulsa sorpresa por las cosas que le contaba Sofía, pero no estaba realmente impresionada, pues su curiosidad no se extendía más allá de Bursley. Ella, como los demás, tenía el formidable y tres veces insensible egocentrismo de las provincias. Y si Sofía la hubiese informado de que a los parisienses les salía la cabeza del ombligo habría murmurado: «¡Bueno, bueno! ¡Válgame Dios! ¡No tenía ni idea de esas cosas! ¡El segundo niño de la señora Brindley tiene la cabeza toda torcida, pobrecillo!».

¿Por qué estaba triste Sofía? No lo sabía. Era libre; libre para ir donde quisiera y para hacer lo que quisiera. No tenía responsabilidades ni preocupaciones. El pensar en su marido hacía mucho que ya no despertaba en ella ningún sentimiento de ninguna clase. Era rica. El señor Critchlow había acumulado para ella aproximadamente otro tanto de lo que había ganado ella misma. ¡Nunca podría gastarse sus ingresos! No sabía cómo gastarlos. No carecía de nada que estuviera al alcance de una persona. No tenía deseo alguno salvo el de ser feliz. Si unas treinta mil libras hubiesen podido comprar un hijo como Cyril, se habría comprado uno para ella. Lamentaba amargamente no tener hijos. En esto envidiaba a Constanza. Un hijo le parecía el único artículo que valía la pena poseer. Era demasiado libre, estaba demasiado exenta de responsabilidades. A pesar de Constanza, estaba sola en el mundo. Lo extraño de los azares de la vida la abrumaba. Allí estaba a los cincuenta años, sola.

Pero la idea de dejar a Constanza, después de haberse reunido con ella, no le agradaba. La inquietaba. No se imaginaba viviendo lejos de Constanza. Estaba sola..., pero Constanza estaba allí.

Bajó la primera y tuvo una breve conversación con Amy. Y esperó en el peldaño de la puerta de la calle mientras *Fossette* hacía una primera inspección del arroyo de *Mancha.* El aire le pareció cortante.

Constanza, cuando bajó, vio un paraguas extendido en un lado de la mesa del desayuno, el regalo que Sofía le traía de París. Era imposible encontrar uno mejor. Habría impresionado hasta a la tía Harriet. El puño era de oro, con un aro de opalinas engastadas. Las puntas de las varillas eran también de oro. Fue este detalle el que dejó estupefacta a Constanza. Francamente, aquel derroche de lujo había sido desconocido e insospechado en la Plaza. El que las puntas de las varillas hicieran juego con el puño..., ¡eso, en verdad, lo superaba todo! Sofía dijo tranquilamente que aquel artefacto era cosa corriente. Pero no ocultó que se trataba de un paraguas estrictamente de la clase más alta y que podía lucirse ante una reina sin desdoro. Insinuó que el armazón (un «Fox Paragon»), el puño y las puntas durarían muchas sedas. Constanza estaba tan contenta como una niña.

Decidieron ir a la compra juntas. Ambas pensaban sin decirlo que, puesto que era preciso presentar a Sofía en la ciudad más tarde o más temprano, más valía hacerlo más temprano.

Constanza miró al cielo.

—Seguro que no llueve —dijo—. Me llevaré el paraguas.

Capítulo III

HACIA LA VIDA DE HOTEL

I

Sofía llevaba zapatillas de orillo por la mañana. Era una costumbre que había adquirido en la Rue Lord Byron, por casualidad más que con intención de usarlas para supervisar eficazmente a las criadas. Estas zapatillas de orillo fueron la causa inmediata de importantes acontecimientos en la Plaza de San Lucas. Sofía llevaba con Constanza un mes de calendario —¡desde luego, era sorprendente cómo había pasado el tiempo! —y se había familiarizado con la casa. La circunspección había dejado de marcar las relaciones entre las hermanas. Sobre todo Constanza no le ocultaba nada a Sofía, a la que hacía saber los grandes y pequeños defectos de Amy y todos los demás crujidos de la máquina doméstica. En las comidas usaban los manteles corrientes; los días en que se arreglaba la sala, Constanza daba por supuesto, con una risita, que Sofía excusaría el mandil de Amy, que no había tenido tiempo para cambiarse. En suma, Sofía ya no era una extraña y nadie se sentía obligado a fingir que las cosas no eran tal y como eran. A pesar de la inmundicia y el provincianismo de Bursley, Sofía gozaba con la intimidad de Constanza. En cuanto a Constanza, estaba encantada. Las inflexiones de sus voces, cuando conversaban en privado, eran a menudo tiernas, y aquella repentina y sorprendente ternura las entusiasmaba secretamente a las dos.

La mañana del cuarto domingo, Sofía se puso la bata y aquellas zapatillas de orillo muy temprano y fue de visita a la habitación de Constanza. Estaba un poco preocupada por ella y aquella preocupación le resultaba grata. Le daba mucha importancia. Amy, con su eterno descuido por lo que atañe a las puertas, la mañana anterior se había olvidado, vergonzosamente, de echar el cerrojo de la puerta de la calle que daba a la sala, y Constanza no se había dado cuenta de ello sino por el fenómeno de sentir frío en las piernas mientras desayunaban. Siempre se sentaba de espaldas a la puerta, en la mecedora acanalada de su madre, y Sofía en el lugar —aunque no en la silla— que ocupaban John Baines en los años cuarenta y Samuel Povey en los setenta y después. Constanza se había alarmado por aquel frío. «¡Me va a volver la ciática!», había exclamado; a Sofía la sobresaltó su tono aprensivo. Antes del final de la tarde la ciática había vuelto a atacar a Constanza y Sofía se hizo por primera vez idea de lo que puede hacer una ciática palpitante para torturar a su víctima. Constanza, además de la ciática, se había resfriado y no paraba de estornudar, acto que le causaba agudísimo dolor. Sofía había detenido pronto los estornudos. Hizo que Constanza se acostara. Hubiera querido llamar al médico, pero Constanza le aseguró que éste no le iba a aconsejar nada nuevo. Sufría angelicalmente. La débil y exquisita dulzura de su sonrisa, mientras yacía en la cama aquejada de un dolor punzante y en medio de botellas de agua caliente, le resultaba asombrosa a Sofía. Le hacía pensar en las reservas del carácter de Constanza y en la variedad de manifestaciones de la sangre de los Baines.

Así pues, la mañana del domingo se había levantado temprano, justo después que Amy.

Halló que Constanza estaba un poco mejor por lo que se refiere a la neuralgia, pero extenuada por los tormentos de una noche sin sueño. Sofía, aunque tampoco había dormido bien, sintió cierto cargo de conciencia por haber dormido.

—¡Pobrecita mía! —murmuró, rebosante de simpatía—. Te voy a hacer té ahora mismo.

—Oh, Amy lo hará —dijo Constanza.

Sofía repitió, con entonación resuelta:

—Lo haré yo misma. —Y tras asegurarse de que no era necesario renovar de inmediato las botellas de agua caliente, continuó escaleras abajo con sus zapatillas.

Mientras descendía los oscuros peldaños de la cocina oyó la voz de Amy exclamando malhumorada:

—¡Oh, tú, lárgate! —y después un gañido de *Fossette.* Sofía hizo un rápido movimiento de ira que logró contener. Las relaciones entre ella y *Fossette* no se caracterizaban por las efusiones, y su dominio sobre los perros era en general severo; ni siquiera cuando estaba sola besaba al animal apasionadamente, como suelen hacer las personas que tienen perro. Pero quería a *Fossette.* Y, además, aquel cariño se había avivado

últimamente por el ridículo del que Bursley había cubierto a aquel extraño animal. Por fortuna para el *amour-propre* de Sofía, en Bursley no había manera de esquilar a *Fossette,* y así la perrita se iba haciendo de día en día menos cómica a los ojos de Bursley. Su ama, por lo tanto, podía ceder a la fuerza de las circunstancias sin menoscabo de su dignidad lo que no habría cedido a la opinión popular. Sospechaba que a Amy no le agradaba la perra, pero el acento que había puesto en el «tú» indicaba al parecer que Amy hacía distinciones entre *Fossette* y *Mancha,* cosa que perturbó a Sofía mucho más que el gañido de *Fossette.*

Sofía tosió y entró en la cocina.

Mancha lamía la leche de su desayuno en un platito y *Fossette* estaba con aire nostálgico, una masa amorfa de pelo oscuro, debajo de la mesa.

—Buenos días, Amy —dijo Sofía con aterradora cortesía.

—Buenos días, señora —repuso Amy, hoscamente.

Amy sabía que Sofía había oído aquel gañido y Sofía sabía que lo sabía. La simulación de cortesía era terrible. Las dos tenían una sensación como si la cocina estuviese alfombrada de pólvora y hubiese cerillas encendidas por doquier. Sofía tenía un motivo de queja muy justo contra Amy por haberse dejado la puerta abierta el día anterior. Pensó que, después de aquel pecado, lo menos que podía hacer Amy era mostrar contrición y docilidad y estar ansiosa por complacer, cosas que no había dejado ver. Amy tenía un motivo de queja contra Sofía porque ésta le había impuesto un nuevo método para cocer la verdura. Amy era enemiga declarada de los métodos nuevos o extranjeros. Sofía no sabía nada de aquel resentimiento, pues Amy lo ocultaba bajo la acostumbrada cortesía rastrera que gastaba con ella.

Se inspeccionaron mutuamente como ejércitos enemigos.

—¡Es una lástima que no tenga cocina de gas aquí! Quiero hacer té ahora mismo para la señora Povey —dijo Sofía, examinando el recién nacido fuego.

—¿Cocina de gas, señora? —dijo Amy en tono hostil. Fueron las zapatillas de orillo de Sofía lo que finalmente decidió a Amy a dejar caer la máscara de la deferencia.

No hizo ningún esfuerzo para ayudar a Sofía; no le dio indicación alguna de dónde se encontraban las diversas cosas necesarias para hacer el té. Sofía cogió la tetera de hervir el agua y la lavó; cogió la tetera de servir más pequeña y, como se habían dejado hojas dentro, la lavó también, exagerando el ruido y la meticulosidad. Cogió el azúcar y las demás bagatelas y avivó el fuego con el fuelle. Y Amy no hizo nada en especial salvo animar a *Mancha* a beber.

—¿Es ésa toda la leche que le da a *Fossette?* —inquirió fríamente Sofía, cuando le tocó el tumo a *Fossette.* Estaba esperando que hirviera el agua. El plato de la perra, la cual era del doble de tamaño que *Mancha,* no estaba lleno ni a la mitad.

—Es todo lo que sobra, señora —gruñó Amy.

Sofía no contestó. Al poco rato se fue con el té hecho. Si Amy no hubiera sido una mujer madura, de más de cuarenta años, se hubiera quedado bufando al marcharse aquélla. Pero Amy no era precisamente la chica tonta de costumbre.

Excepto por una cierta rigidez al presentar la bandeja a su hermana, la conducta de Sofía no dejó entrever que la amazona que había en ella se había despertado. La anhelante y temblorosa satisfacción de Constanza al ver el té la conmovió hondamente y se sintió muy agradecida porque Constanza la tuviera a ella, a Sofía, para socorrerla en los momentos de aflicción.

Unos minutos después, Constanza, tras preguntar a Sofía qué hora era en el reloj que había en una urna sobre la cómoda (el reloj suizo no funcionaba desde hacía tiempo), tiró de la borla roja del cordón de la campanilla, que pendía sobre la cama. Una campana tintineó a lo lejos, en la cocina.

—¿Puedo hacer algo? —interrogó Sofía.

—Oh, no, gracias —dijo Constanza—, Sólo quiero las cartas, si ha venido el cartero. Ya hace rato que tendría que haber pasado.

Sofía había visto durante su estancia que era el domingo por la mañana cuando Constanza esperaba carta de Cyril. Se había acordado expresamente entre madre e hijo que Cyril escribiera los sábados y

Constanza los domingos. Sofía sabía que Constanza valoraba mucho aquella carta; se mostraba cada vez más preocupada por Cyril conforme se aproximaba el fin de semana. Desde la llegada de Sofía, las cartas de Cyril no habían dejado de venir, pero una vez se había reducido a una o dos líneas garabateadas y Sofía dedujo que nunca había certeza y que Constanza estaba acostumbrada a las desilusiones, aunque no reconciliada con ellas. Sofía tenía permiso para leer las cartas. Dejaban en su mente la ligera impresión de que su favorito era tal vez un poco descuidado en sus relaciones con su madre.

No hubo respuesta a la campanilla. Constanza la hizo sonar de nuevo, sin resultado.

Con un movimiento brusco, Sofía salió de la habitación por la de Cyril.

—Amy —llamó desde la barandilla—,¿no oye que está llamando la señora?

—Voy todo lo deprisa que puedo, señora —la voz seguía siendo hosca.

Sofía murmuró algo inaudible y permaneció allí hasta estar segura de que era cierto que Amy acudía; después volvió a la habitación de Cyril. Aguardó allí, indecisa, no exactamente de vigilancia ni exactamente reacia a asistir a una entrevista entre Amy y su señora; en realidad no podría haber analizado con precisión el motivo que tenía para quedarse en la habitación de Cyril con la puerta entre ella y la de Constanza abierta.

Amy subió a regañadientes la escalera y entró en el dormitorio de su ama con la barbilla levantada. Pensaba que Sofía había subido al segundo piso, que era «su sitio». Se quedó en silencio junto a la cama, sin mostrar simpatía alguna por Constanza ni curiosidad por su indisposición. Le molestaban los ataques de ciática de Constanza por constituir una reconvención permanente de su negligencia en lo tocante a las puertas.

Constanza aguardó también una fracción de segundo, como expectante.

—Bien, Amy —dijo al cabo, con la voz debilitada por la fatiga y el dolor—, ¿Y las cartas?

—No hay cartas —dijo Amy, lúgubremente—. Ya podía saber que si hubiera llegado alguna se la habría subido. El cartero pasó hace veinte minutos. No hacen más que interrumpirme, ¡como si no tuviera bastante que hacer... ahora!

Se dio la vuelta para irse y estaba abriendo la puerta.

—¡Amy! —llamó con acritud una voz. Era la de Sofía.

La sirvienta dio un salto y a pesar de sí misma obedeció la implícita e imperiosa orden de detenerse.

—Hará el favor de no hablar a la señora en ese tono, por lo menos mientras yo esté aquí —dijo Sofía gélidamente—. Sabe que está enferma y débil. Debería avergonzarse de sí misma.

—Yo nunca...—empezó Amy.

—No quiero discutir —concluyó Sofía, enojada—. Por favor, salga de la habitación.

Amy obedeció. Estaba acobardada además de estupefacta.

Para las personas que tomaron parte en él, aquel episodio fue intensamente dramático. Sofía había conjeturado que Constanza consentía a Amy muchas libertades en su manera de hablar; incluso había sospechado que ésta se permitía en ocasiones ser grosera. Pero que la relación entre ellas llegara a que Constanza fuese intimidada por una Amy francamente insolente..., aquello había escandalizado y herido a Sofía, que tuvo de repente una visión de Constanza como víctima de un reinado del terror. «Si esa mujer hace eso estando yo aquí —se dijo Sofía—, ¿qué hará cuando estén las dos solas en la casa?».

—Bien —exclamó—; en mi vida he visto una conducta semejante. ¡Y tú le dejas que te hable de ese modo! ¡Pero, Constanza!

Constanza estaba sentada en la cama con la pequeña bandeja del té sobre las rodillas. Tenía los ojos húmedos. Se le habían llenado de lágrimas cuando supo que no había carta. Habitualmente, el no recibir carta de Cyril no la hubiera hecho llorar, pero la debilidad disminuía su dominio de sí misma. Y una vez habían brotado las lágrimas de sus ojos, no podía echarlas. ¡Allí estaban!

—Lleva mucho tiempo conmigo —musitó Constanza—, Se toma libertades. La he corregido una o dos veces.

—¡Libertades! —repitió Sofía—¡Libertades!

—Por supuesto, en realidad no debería permitirlo —dijo Constanza—, Tendría que haberle puesto fin hace tiempo.

—Bien —dijo Sofía, muy aliviada por aquel síntoma del secreto espíritu de Constanza—. Espero que no me consideres una entrometida, pero de verdad que ha sido demasiado para mí. Me salieron las palabras de la boca antes de que... —Se detuvo.

—Tuviste mucha razón, mucha razón —dijo Constanza, viendo ante sí, en la mujer de cincuenta años, a la apasionada muchacha de quince.

—He tenido mucha experiencia con criadas —explicó Sofía.

—Ya lo sé —la interrumpió Constanza.

—Y estoy convencida de que nunca trae cuenta soportar cualquier frescura. Las sirvientas no entienden la amabilidad ni la tolerancia. Y este tipo de cosas va a más, hasta que ni tu alma te pertenece.

—Tienes toda la razón —repitió Constanza de forma todavía más rotunda.

Le daba fuerza para hablar no sólo el convencimiento de que Sofía tenía toda la razón, sino también el deseo de asegurar a Sofía que no era una entrometida. La alusión de Amy al trabajo adicional avergonzaba a su ama como anfitriona y estaba obligada a repararla.

—Pues bien, en cuanto a esa mujer... —prosiguió Sofía en voz más baja, sentándose confidencialmente en el borde de la cama. Y contó a Constanza lo de Amy y los perros y la grosería de Amy en la cocina—. No hubiera mencionado estas cosas ni en sueños —terminó—, Pero en estas circunstancias creo que tenías que saberlo. Creo que debes saberlo.

Y Constanza asintió con la cabeza mostrando completo acuerdo. No se molestó en pedir disculpas a su invitada por las fechorías de su criada. Las hermanas estaban ahora en un plano de intimidad en el que tales disculpas hubieran sido superfluas. Las voces se hicieron cada vez más tenues y el caso de Amy se puso al descubierto y se examinó hasta en los menores detalles.

Poco a poco se fueron dando cuenta de que lo que había ocurrido era una crisis. Estaban muy excitadas y aprensivas, y se sentían desafiantes, de una manera excesivamente consciente. Al mismo tiempo se sentían empujadas la una hacia la otra, por obra de la generosa indignación de Sofía y de la absoluta lealtad de Constanza.

Pasó largo rato antes de que Constanza dijera, pensando en otra cosa:

—Espero que se haya retrasado en el correo.

—¿La carta de Cyril? ¡Oh, sin duda! ¡Si supieras cómo andan los correos en Francia, santo cielo!

Luego decidieron, con pequeños suspiros, hacer frente con buen ánimo a la crisis.

Cierto que era una crisis, y grande. La sensación de crisis afectó a la atmósfera de toda la casa. Constanza se levantó a la hora del té y consiguió ir andando al salón. Y cuando Sofía, tras un rato de ausencia en su habitación, bajó a tomar el té y lo encontró todo servido, Constanza susurró:

—¡Ha dado aviso de que se despide! ¡Y en domingo, encima!

—¿Qué te ha dicho?

—No dijo gran cosa —replicó vagamente Constanza, ocultando a Sofía que Amy había insistido en la profusión de señoras que había en aquella casa—. Después de todo, es lo mismo. Ella estará perfectamente. Ha ahorrado un buen pico y tiene amigos.

—Pero ¡qué estúpido por su parte renunciar a una casa tan buena!

—Lo que pasa es que no le importa —dijo Constanza, que estaba un poco ofendida por la defección de Amy—. Cuando se le mete una cosa en la cabeza, lo que pasa es que no le importa. No tiene sentido común. Yo siempre lo he sabido.

—¿Entonces se marcha usted, Amy? —le dijo Sofía a última hora, cuando Amy pasó por la sala para irse a dormir. Constanza estaba ya preparada para la noche.

—Sí, señora —respondió Amy con precisión.

Su tono no era grosero pero sí firme. Al parecer había estudiado su posición con calma.

—Siento haberme visto obligada a corregirla esta mañana —dijo Sofía con alegre cordialidad, complacida a pesar de sí misma por el tono empleado por la mujer—, Pero pienso que comprenderá que tenía razones para ello.

—Lo he estado pensando, señora —dijo Amy con dignidad—, y creo que debo irme.

Hubo una pausa.

—Bien; usted es quien mejor lo sabe... Buenas noches, Amy.

—Buenas noches, señora.

«Es buena persona —pensó Sofía—, pero ya no puede quedarse en esta casa».

Las hermanas se vieron frente al hecho de que Constanza tenía un mes para encontrar una nueva sirvienta y que era preciso adiestrarla para que hiciera bien las cosas, y era fácil que resultara un desastre. Tanto Constanza como Amy se sentían profundamente disgustadas por la cercana disolución de un vínculo que databa de los años setenta. Y ambas estaban decididas a que no hubiese otra opción que la disolución. Los extraños sólo se enteraron de que la criada de la señora Povey se marchaba. Los extraños sólo vieron el anuncio que puso la señora Povey en la *Señal* solicitando nueva criada. No podían leer los corazones. Algún miembro de la joven generación llegó a decir, en tono de superioridad, que las mujeres anticuadas como la señora Povey parecían no tener otra cosa en la cabeza que criadas, etcétera, etcétera.

II

—Y bien, ¿has recibido tu carta? —preguntó Sofía a Constanza animadamente cuando entró en la habitación a la mañana siguiente.

Constanza se limitó a mover la cabeza. Estaba muy deprimida. La animación de Sofía se desvaneció. Como aborrecía el optimismo insensato, no dijo nada. De lo contrario podría haber dicho: «Quizá venga en el correo de la tarde». Reinaba la melancolía. Sobre todo a Constanza, como Amy había dado aviso de despido y Cyril andaba «remiso», le parecía que el tiempo estaba dislocado y la vida no valía la pena. Ni siquiera la presencia de Sofía era un gran consuelo. Sofía salió inmediatamente de la habitación. La ciática de Constanza volvió, agravada. Ella lo lamentaba, menos por el dolor que porque acababa de asegurar a Sofía, con toda sinceridad, que no le dolía; Sofía se mostró escéptica. Después de aquello era imprescindible que Constanza se levantara como todos los días. Había dicho que se levantaría como todos los días. ¡Además, estaba la enorme empresa de encontrar una nueva criada! Las preocupaciones se le tornaban montañas. ¿Y si Cyril estuviese gravemente enfermo y no pudiera escribir? ¿Y si le hubiera ocurrido algo? ¿Y si jamás encontraba una nueva criada?

Sofía, levantada en su habitación, se esforzaba en adoptar un talante filosófico y ver el mundo con optimismo. Se decía que tenía que ocuparse de Constanza, que lo que le faltaba a ésta era energía, que era preciso sacarla de su marasmo. Y en la cavernosa cocina, Amy, que estaba preparando el desayuno de las nueve, meditaba sobre la ingratitud de las patronas y se preguntaba qué le reservaba el destino. Tenía una madre viuda en el pintoresco pueblo de Sneyd, donde cuidaba del bienestar mortal e inmortal de todos los habitantes la vicerregente de Dios, la condesa de Chell; poseía unas doscientas libras de su propiedad; su madre llevaba años pidiéndole que compartiese su hogar de forma gratuita. No obstante, el alma de Amy estaba llena de aprensiones y un vago abatimiento. La casa era una casa de aflicción, y aquellas tres mujeres, cada una de ellas solitaria, devotas de la aflicción. Y los dos perros iban de acá para allá desconsolados, sabiendo que había que ser circunspecto y sin sospechar cómo había cambiado la atmósfera de la casa nada más que una puerta a medio cerrar y un tono incorrecto.

Cuando Sofía, esta vez totalmente vestida, bajaba a desayunar, oyó la voz de Constanza que la llamaba débilmente y halló a la convaleciente todavía en el lecho. Era imposible ocultar la verdad. Constanza sufría de nuevo grandes dolores y su estado moral no contribuía a darle fortaleza.

—Tenías que habérmelo dicho, para empezar —no pudo evitar decir Sofía—; entonces hubiera sabido qué hacer.

Constanza no se defendió diciendo que el dolor no había reaparecido hasta después de su primera entrevista aquella mañana. Lo único que hizo fue echarse a llorar.

—¡Estoy muy deprimida! —gimoteó.

Sofía se sorprendió. Pensó que aquello no era «propio de una Baines».

En el transcurso de aquella interminable mañana de abril se incrementó su conocimiento de las posibilidades de la ciática como agente destructor del carácter. Constanza no tenía fuerzas para resistirse a su actividad. La dulzura de su resignación parecía transformarse en nulidad. Insistía en que el médico no iba a hacer nada por ella.

Hacia el mediodía, cuando estaba Sofía moviéndose a su alrededor con nerviosismo, de repente profirió un grito:

—¡Siento como si la pierna me fuera a estallar! —exclamó.

Aquello decidió a Sofía. En cuanto Constanza se calmó un poco bajó la escalera para hablar con Amy.

—Amy —dijo—, ¿es el doctor Stirling el que trata a la señora cuando está enferma, verdad?

—Sí, señora.

—¿Dónde está su consulta?

—Bueno, señora, vivía justo enfrente, con el doctor Harrop, pero hace poco se fue a vivir a Bleakridge.

—Quiero que se vista y vaya allí corriendo y le pida que venga en cuanto pueda.

—Lo haré, señora —respondió Amy con la mayor disposición—. Me pareció oír gritar a la señora. —No era efusiva. Era mejor que efusiva: amable y servicial con una cierta reserva.

«Hay en esa mujer algo que me agrada», se dijo Sofía. Para ser una estúpida declarada, Amy sabía defenderse muy bien.

El doctor Stirling llegó a las dos. Hacía más de una década que se había establecido en las Cinco Ciudades; el sello del éxito estaba grabado en su frente y en la orgullosa cabeza de su caballo trotón. En expresión de la *Señal,* se había «identificado con la vida local de la región». Agradaba a la gente, al ser un hombre de muchas simpatías. Con su sonoro acento escocés podía hablar con la misma autoridad del sabor del whisky o de un sermón, y le sobraba tacto para no hablar nunca de whiskies o de sermones donde no debía. Había pronunciado un discurso (en representación de las profesiones académicas) en la comida anual de la Sociedad para la Persecución de los Delincuentes, y ese discurso (en el cual el elogio de los libros hizo inocuo el elogió del vino tinto: su excelente biblioteca era famosa) lo había clasificado como una persona ocurrente a juicio del cónsul americano, cuyos modales de después de comer tenían como modelo los de Mark Twain. Contaba treinta y cinco años, era alto y rechoncho y tenía un mofletudo rostro de muchacho que la maquinilla de afeitar azuleaba cada mañana.

El efecto inmediato de su llegada sobre Constanza fue milagroso. Su presencia casi la curó por un momento, como si su enfermedad hubiera sido un dolor de muelas y él un dentista. Después, concluido el examen, volvió a apoderarse de ella el dolor.

Al hablar con ella y con Sofía, el médico escuchó con mucha seriedad todo cuanto dijeron; era como si considerara que era el único caso que despertaba su auténtico interés profesional, pero tal como se desarrollaba, con toda su dificultad y su urgencia, parecía descubrir modos maravillosos de tratarlo; aquellos misteriosos descubrimientos le daban al parecer seguridad, y comunicaba su seguridad a la paciente por medio de salidas humorísticas apenas perceptibles. Era un médico muy cualificado. Este hecho, sin embargo, no tenía parte en su popularidad, la cual se debía exclusivamente a su raro don de tomarse muy en serio un caso sin dejar de estar alegre.

Dijo que regresaría al cabo de un cuarto de hora y lo hizo pasados trece minutos, trayendo una aguja hipodérmica con la que atacaba al dolor en sus principales bastiones.

—¿Qué es? —preguntó Constanza, respirando gratitud por el alivio que sentía.

Él hizo una pausa, mirándola pícaramente con los ojos entrecerrados.

—Sería mejor que no se lo dijera —contestó—. Podría llevarla a hacer diabluras.

—Oh, pero tiene que decírmelo, doctor —insistió Constanza, a quien preocupaba que él tuviera que estar a la altura de su reputación a causa de Sofía.

—Es hidrocloruro de cocaína —dijo, y levantó un dedo—. Guárdese del hábito de la cocaína. Ha destrozado muchas familias respetables. Pero si no tuviera la confianza que tengo en su fuerza de carácter, señora Povey, no me habría arriesgado.

—¡Qué bromista es este doctor! —sonrió Constanza, que ya estaba en un mundo más luminoso.

Él dijo que volvería hacia las cinco y media y llegó hacia las seis y media; le inyectó más cocaína. La especial importancia del caso quedó establecida con ello. En esta segunda visita, él y Sofía se hicieron pronto buenos amigos. Cuando lo acompañó abajo, se quedó charlando con ella un buen rato, como si no tuviese otra cosa que hacer en el mundo, mientras su cochero paseaba al caballo arriba y abajo ante la puerta.

Su actitud hacia ella halagó a Sofía, pues demostraba que la tenía por una mujer nada corriente. Implicaba la permanente idea de que sin duda era una mina de interés para todo el que tuviera el privilegio de ahondar en sus recuerdos. Hasta entonces, entre los conocidos de Constanza, Sofía no había conocido a nadie que mostrara más que una curiosidad superficial por su vida. Su regreso era aceptado con indiferencia. Su huida, hacía treinta años, había perdido enteramente su carácter dramático. En realidad, mucha gente no se había enterado de que se había escapado de casa para casarse con un viajante de comercio; a quienes lo recordaban o se habían enterado de ello les parecía una hazaña más bien banal: ¡después de treinta años...! Su temor, y el de Constanza, de que la ciudad murmurara y cotilleara era ridículamente infundado. El efecto del paso del tiempo era tal que hasta el señor Critchlow parecía haber olvidado incluso que ella había sido la responsable directa de la muerte de su padre. Ella misma casi lo había olvidado; cuando por casualidad pensaba en ello, no sentía vergüenza ni remordimiento; consideraba su muerte puramente accidental y no del todo una desgracia. Sólo en relación con dos puntos se mostraba curiosa la ciudad: en relación con su marido y con la cifra exacta por la que había vendido la pensión. La ciudad sabía que probablemente no fuera viuda, pues se había visto obligada a decírselo al señor Critchlow y éste, en algún momento de ternura, se lo había dicho a María. Pero nadie osaba mencionarle el nombre de Gerald Scales. Con su vestimenta a la moda, su llamativo semblante imperioso y la leyenda de su riqueza, inspiraba respeto, si no temor, a las gentes de la ciudad. En la actitud del médico había un punto de asombro; ella lo percibió. Aunque la sosa apatía de la gente que había conocido hasta entonces no carecía desde luego de su lado ventajoso para la tranquilidad mental de Sofía, hería su vanidad, y la mirada del médico aliviaba el escozor. Era evidente que había adivinado lo interesante que era; era evidente que quería disfrutar de ello.

—Acabo de leer *El desastre,* de Zola —dijo.

Sofía buscó en su memoria y recordó un cartel.

—¡Oh! —contestó—,*¿La Debâcle?*

—Sí. ¿Qué opina de ella? —Sus ojos se iluminaron ante la perspectiva de una charla. Le agradó incluso oírle el título en francés.

—No la he leído —dijo ella, lamentando por un momento no haberlo hecho, pues veía que él estaba deslumbrado. El médico se imaginaba que residir en un país extranjero suponía conocer la literatura de dicho país. Sin embargo, nunca se había imaginado que residir en Inglaterra supusiera conocer la literatura inglesa. Sofía llevaba sin leer casi nada desde 1870; para ella el autor más reciente era Cherbuliez[58]. Además, de Zola tenía la impresión de que no era nada agradable y de que era enemigo de su raza, aunque en aquella fecha el mundo apenas sabía nada de Dreyfus. El doctor Stirling había dado por hecho con excesivo apresuramiento que las opiniones del *bourgeois* en materia de arte eran diferentes en países distintos.

—¿Y es cierto que vivió usted el asedio de París? —interrogó, intentándolo de nuevo.

—Sí.

—¿Y la Comuna?

—Sí, la Comuna también.

—¡Vaya! —exclamó él—¡Es increíble! Anteanoche, leyendo *El desastre,* me dije que usted seguro que había vivido muchas de aquellas cosas. No sabía que iba a tener tan pronto el placer de charlar con usted.

Ella sonrió.

—Pero ¿cómo sabía usted que estuve en el asedio de París? —le preguntó curiosa.

—¿Que cómo lo sabía? Lo sabía porque vi la felicitación de cumpleaños que envió a la señora Povey en 1871, después de que hubiese terminado. Es una de sus más preciadas posesiones, esa tarjeta. Me la enseñó un día, cuando me dijo que usted iba a venir.

Sofía se sobresaltó. Había olvidado por completo aquella tarjeta. No se le había ocurrido pensar que Constanza atesorara las tarjetas que le había mandado durante sus años de exilio. Satisfizo lo mejor que pudo el anhelo del médico de conocer detalles personales acerca del sitio y la Comuna. Tal vez se hubiera sentido decepcionado por lo prosaico de sus respuestas de no ser porque estaba decidido a no dejarse decepcionar.

—Parece usted habérselo tomado todo con mucha tranquilidad —observó él.

—¡Ah, sí! —concedió ella, no sin orgullo—. Pero ha pasado mucho tiempo desde entonces.

Aquellos acontecimientos, tal como persistían en su memoria, difícilmente justificaban el tremendo barullo que hubo posteriormente en tomo a ellos. ¿Qué eran, al fin y al cabo? Eso pensaba en secreto. El mismo Chirac no era nada más que una vaga sombra. Sin embargo, fuese verdadera o falsa la valoración que se hiciese de aquellos acontecimientos, era una mujer que los había vivido, y la alta estima en que el doctor Stirling tenía este hecho le resultaba muy placentera. Su relación amistosa estaba cerca de la intimidad. Había anochecido. Fuera se oyó a un caballo tascar el freno.

—Tengo que marcharme —dijo él al fin, pero no se movió.

—Entonces, ¿no hay nada más que pueda yo hacer por mi hermana? —inquirió Sofía.

—Creo que no —dijo él—. No es cuestión de medicina.

—Entonces, ¿de qué? —interrogó ella sin rodeos.

—Nervios —respondió el médico—. Casi todo son nervios. Ya conozco algo la constitución de la señora Povey y esperaba que la visita de usted le haría bien.

—Ha estado muy bien —quiero decir, lo que se podría llamar muy bien— hasta anteayer, cuando estuvo en esa corriente. Estaba mejor anoche y luego, esta mañana, la encontré muchísimo peor.

—¿No tiene preocupaciones? —El doctor la miró con aire confidencial.

—¿Qué preocupaciones puede tener? —exclamó Sofía—. Es decir..., preocupaciones de verdad.

—¡Exactamente! —asintió él.

—Yo le digo que no sabe lo que son las preocupaciones —añadió Sofía.

—¡Igual que yo! —dijo el médico, con los ojos brillantes.

—Estaba un poco disgustada porque ayer no recibió su habitual carta del domingo de Cyril. Pero entonces estaba débil y deprimida.

—¡Un chico listo, Cyril! —reflexionó el médico.

—Yo creo que es un muchacho especialmente agradable —dijo Sofía con entusiasmo.

—Entonces ¿lo ha visto?

—Por supuesto —dijo Sofía con bastante frialdad. ¿Se imaginaba el médico que no conocía a su propio sobrino? Volvió al tema de su hermana—. Está también un poco molesta, creo yo, porque la criada se despide.

—¡Oh! ¿Entonces Amy se despide? —Bajó aún más la voz—. Entre usted y yo, no es mala cosa.

—Me alegro de que lo piense.

—Unos años más y la criada habría sido el ama aquí. Esas cosas se ven venir, pero es difícil hacer algo. En realidad no se puede hacer nada.

—Yo sí que hice algo —replicó Sofía—, Le dije lisa y llanamente que esto no podía continuar así mientras yo estuviera en esta casa. Al principio no lo sospeché, pero cuando lo averigüé..., ¡ya se puede figurar! —Dejó al doctor que imaginara lo que se podía figurar.

Él sonrió.

—No —dijo—. Puedo entender fácilmente que no sospechara nada al principio. Cuando está bien y animada, la señora Povey sabe defenderse; eso me dicen. Pero lo cierto es que la situación iba empeorando poco a poco.

—Así pues, ¿la gente hablaba de ello? —inquirió Sofía, escandalizada.

—¡Como natural de Bursley, señora Scales —explicó el médico—, debería usted saber lo que hace la gente de Bursley! —Sofía frunció los labios. El médico se puso en pie, alisándose el chaleco.

—¿Y para qué tiene que agobiarse con las criadas? —estalló—. Es totalmente libre. No tiene ni una preocupación en el mundo, ojalá se diera cuenta. ¿Por qué no sale y se divierte? Lo que necesita es movimiento; eso es lo que necesita su hermana.

—Tiene toda la razón —estalló a su vez Sofía—. ¡Eso es exactamente lo que yo me digo; eso exactamente! Esta misma mañana lo estaba pensando. Necesita movimiento. Está metida en la rutina.

—Necesita distraerse. ¿Por qué no va a algún sitio de playa a vivir en un hotel y a divertirse? ¿Hay algo que se lo impida?

—Nada en absoluto.

—¡Y no estar dependiendo de una criada! Yo creo en la diversión..., ¡siempre que uno tenga dinero para ello! ¿Se puede imaginar que alguien viva en Bursley por gusto? ¡Y sobre todo en la Plaza de San Lucas, justo en lo peor de todo! ¡Humo! ¡Suciedad! ¡Sin aire! ¡Sin luz! ¡Sin paisaje! ¡Sin entretenimientos! ¿Para qué lo hace? Está metida en la rutina.

—Sí, está metida en la rutina —dijo Sofía, repitiendo su propia frase, que él había copiado.

—¡Caramba! —exclamó el médico—. ¡Ya me largaría yo a divertirme si pudiera! Su hermana es una mujer joven.

—¡Claro que lo es! —coincidió Sofía, pensando que ella era todavía más joven—. ¡Claro que lo es!

—Y, quitando que tiene una constitución nerviosa y ciertas predisposiciones, no le pasa nada. Esa ciática... no quiero decir que se curara con un cambio total y quitándose de encima esas ridículas preocupaciones, pero pudiera ser. No solamente vive en las condiciones más deprimentes, sino que además padece torturas por causa de ello, y no tiene ninguna necesidad de estar aquí.

—Doctor —dijo Sofía solemnemente, impresionada—, tiene usted toda la razón. Estoy de acuerdo con cada palabra que dice.

—Naturalmente, tiene mucho apego a la casa —prosiguió él, echando un vistazo en tomo suyo—. Lo sé perfectamente. ¡Después de vivir aquí toda su vida! Pero es preciso que se libre de ese apego. Tiene la obligación de hacerlo. Debe mostrar un poco de energía. Yo tengo un profundo apego a mi cama por las mañanas, pero he de dejarla.

—Por supuesto —dijo Sofía en tono impaciente, como si le repugnara toda persona que no pudiese percibir o no suscribiera las verdades palmarias que expresaba el médico—, ¡Por supuesto!

—Lo que necesita es el ajetreo de la vida en un buen hotel, un buen balneario, por ejemplo. Estar entre gente animada. ¡Fiestas! Juegos! ¡Excursiones! No sería la misma. Ya lo vería usted. ¿No lo haría yo, si pudiera? Se olvidaría pronto de su ciática. No sé cuáles son los ingresos anuales de la señora Povey, pero me figuro que si se le mete en la cabeza la idea de vivir en el hotel más caro de Inglaterra no habría ninguna

razón para que no lo hiciera.

Sofía levantó la cabeza y sonrió, calladamente divertida.

—Supongo que no —dijo en tono de superioridad.

—Un hotel..., eso es vida. Sin preocupaciones. Si uno necesita algo, toca un timbre. Si un camarero se despide, no es uno quien tiene que preocuparse por ello. Pero usted sabe todo eso, señora Scales.

—Nadie lo sabe mejor —murmuró Sofía.

—Buenas tardes —dijo bruscamente el médico, tendiéndole la mano—. Vendré por la mañana.

—¿Ha mencionado esto alguna vez a mi hermana? —le preguntó Sofía, poniéndose en pie.

—Sí —repuso él—, Pero es inútil. Oh, sí que se lo he dicho. Pero ella está convencida de que es de todo punto imposible. Ni siquiera querría oír hablar de vivir en Londres con su querido hijo. No quiere escuchar.

—Nunca se me había ocurrido —dijo Sofía—. Buenas noches.

El apretón de manos fue íntimo y mutuamente comprensivo. A él le agradaron la rápida receptividad de su temperamento y el imperioso vigor que de vez en cuando brillaba en sus respuestas. Se dio cuenta de la apenas perceptible distorsión de su rostro, hermoso y algo gastado, y se dijo: «Ha pasado lo suyo» y «tendrá que andarse con cuidado». Sofía se sintió complacida de la admiración de él y porque con ella dejaba de lado sus jocosidades para con los pacientes y hablaba llanamente como hablaría un hombre sensato cuando se encuentra con una mujer de singular prudencia, y también porque en sus pensamientos hallaba eco y ampliación de los suyos propios. Le hizo el honor de quedarse en la puerta hasta que se hubo marchado.

Durante unos momentos permaneció cavilando a solas en la sala; después bajó el gas y subió a ver a su hermana, que estaba en la cama, a oscuras. Sofía encendió una cerilla.

—Has estado mucho rato hablando con el médico —dijo Constanza—, Es muy agradable, ¿verdad? ¿De qué habló esta vez?

—Quería saber cosas de París y todo eso —respondió Sofía.

—¡Oh! Creo que es un gran estudioso.

Allí acostada en la penumbra, la sencilla Constanza no sospechó que aquellos dos activos y enérgicos personajes le habían estado organizando la vida para que se divirtiera y viviera veinte años más. No sospechó que había sido juzgada y hallada culpable de apegos pecaminosos y de haberse metido en la rutina, y de carecer de los elementos de la normal sagacidad. No se le había ocurrido que, si estaba preocupada y enferma, la razón había de buscarse en su ciega y estúpida obstinación. Se había creído un tipo de persona bastante sensato.

III

Las hermanas comieron juntas temprano en la habitación de Constanza. Ésta se encontraba mucho mejor. Imaginando que le haría bien moverse un poco, incluso se había levantado unos momentos y había paseado un poco por la habitación. Ahora estaba acomodada entre almohadas. Ardía el fuego en la anticuada e ineficaz chimenea. De la Bodega del Sol, que se hallaba enfrente, llegaba el sonido de un fonógrafo, que cantaba invitando a Dios a que salvase a su graciosa reina. Aquel fonógrafo era una asombrosa novedad y llenaba cada noche el «Sol». Durante unas cuantas tardes había suscitado el interés de las hermanas a pesar de sí mismas, pero pronto se habían hartado de él y le habían tomado aborrecimiento. Sofía estaba cada vez más obsesionada por lo monstruosamente absurdo que era el simple hecho de que ella y Constanza estuviesen allí, en aquella casa oscura e incómoda, fastidiada por la alegría de las tabernas, ennegrecida por el humo, rodeada de barro, en lugar de estar lujosamente instaladas en un buen clima, en medio de escenas llenas de belleza y de una resplandeciente limpieza. Secretamente se sentía cada vez más indignada.

Entró Amy llevando una carta en su tosca mano. Cuando, sin ceremonia, se la tendió a Constanza,

Sofía pensó: «Si fuera criada mía traería las cartas en una bandeja». (Ya habían puesto un anuncio en la *Señal.)*

Constanza tomó la carta temblando.

—¡Aquí está por fin! —exclamó.

Cuando se hubo puesto las gafas y la leyó, dijo:

—¡Santo cielo, qué noticia! ¡Va a venir! Por eso no escribió el sábado como de costumbre.

Dio la carta a Sofía para que la leyese. Decía así:

Domingo a medianoche

Querida madre:

Sólo dos letras para decirte que voy a Bursley el miércoles, para un negocio con los Peel. Llegaré a Knype a las 5,28 y tomaré el circular. He estado muy ocupado, y como pensaba ir no escribí el sábado. Espero que no estuvieras preocupada. Un abrazo para ti y para la tía Sofía.

Tuyo, C.

—Tengo que mandarle dos letras —dijo Constanza, excitada.

—¿Qué? ¿Esta noche?

—Sí. Amy puede llevarla al último correo perfectamente. Si no, no sabrá que he recibido su carta.

Tocó la campanilla.

Sofía pensó: «El que venga no es en realidad excusa para que no escribiera el sábado. ¿Cómo iba a figurarse ella que iba a venir? Tendré que decirle una palabrita a ese muchacho. Me sorprende que Constanza esté tan ciega. Ahora que ha llegado la carta, ya está tan contenta». En nombre de la generación mayor le molestaba considerablemente la impaciencia de Constanza por contestarla.

Pero Constanza no estaba tan ciega. Pensaba exactamente lo mismo que Sofía. En su fuero interno, no justificaba ni excusaba en modo alguno a Cyril. Recordaba, uno por uno, casi todos sus momentos de falta de atención hacia ella. «¡Espera que no estuviera preocupada, vaya por Dios!», se dijo con un adarme de amargura, a propósito de lo que decía en su carta.

Con todo, insistió en escribir de inmediato. Y Amy tuvo que traerle recado de escribir.

—El señorito Cyril vendrá el miércoles —dijo a Amy con gran dignidad.

La pétrea tranquilidad de Amy se conmocionó, pues el señorito Cyril significaba mucho para ella. Amy se preguntó cómo podría mirarlo a la cara cuando supiera que se iba a despedir.

Mientras escribía encima de las rodillas, Constanza alzó la mirada a Sofía y dijo, como defendiéndose de una acusación:

—No le escribí ayer, ya lo sabes, ni hoy.

—No —murmuró Sofía en tono de conformidad.

Constanza tocó de nuevo la campanilla y enviaron a Amy al correo.

Poco después, la campanilla sonó por cuarta vez y no hubo respuesta.

—Supongo que no habrá vuelto aún. Pero me había parecido oír la puerta. ¡Cuánto tarda!

—¿Qué quieres? —preguntó Sofía.

—Nada más que hablar con ella —repuso Constanza.

Cuando la campanilla había sonado siete u ocho veces reapareció Amy, algo sin aliento.

—Amy —dijo Constanza—, déjeme ver esas sábanas, ¿quiere?

—Sí, señora —dijo Amy, al parecer sabiendo cuáles de todas las variadas e innumerables sábanas que había en aquella casa.

—Y los almohadones —añadió Constanza cuando Amy salía de la habitación.

Y así siguieron las cosas. Al día siguiente le había subido la fiebre. Constanza se levantó temprano, antes que Sofía, y estuvo trotando por la casa como una chicuela. Inmediatamente después de desayunar, la habitación de Cyril fue asediada y revolucionada; no fue hasta avanzada la tarde cuando se restableció el orden en aquella cámara. Y la mañana del miércoles se le tuvo que limpiar el polvo de nuevo. Sofía contempló los preparativos y la creciente agitación de la conducta de Constanza con un asombro que tuvo verdaderas dificultades para ocultar. «¿Se ha vuelto loca del todo esta mujer?», se preguntaba. El espectáculo era ridículo, o así se lo parecía a ella, cuya trayectoria no incluía mucha experiencia con madres. Las manifestaciones de la ansiedad de Constanza no tenían nada de digno, original ni espléndido. No eran otra cosa que un ajetreo tonto y vulgar; no tenían ningún sentido. Sofía se cuidó bien de hacer observación alguna. Pensó que antes de que ella y Constanza fuesen mucho mayores iba a tener mucho que hacer y que haría falta una diplomacia sutil y una táctica cautelosa. Además, el angélico temperamento de Constanza se veía un tanto afectado por la tensión de la expectación. Mostraba tendencia a gruñir. Cuando la merienda cena estuvo preparada, de repente se subió al sofá y bajó el grabado del «Ciervo en el crepúsculo». El polvo que había en la parte superior del marco la indignaba.

—¿Qué vas a hacer? —preguntó Sofía con un último pasmo.

—Voy a cambiarlo por ése —dijo Constanza, señalando otro grabado que estaba frente a la chimenea —. Él dijo que el efecto sería mucho mejor si se cambiaban. ¡Y su señoría es muy especial!

Constanza no fue a la estación de Bursley a esperar a su hijo. Explicó que la trastornaba y que Cyril también prefería que no fuera.

—¿Y si fuera yo? —dijo Sofía a las cinco y media. La idea se le había ocurrido repentinamente. Pensó: «Así podría hablar con él antes que nadie».

—¡Oh, sí! —accedió Constanza.

Sofía se vistió con notable celeridad. Llegó a la estación un minuto antes de la llegada del tren. Sólo se apearon unas pocas personas, y Cyril no estaba entre ellas. Un mozo dijo que no había ninguna conexión entre los trenes de la línea circular y los expresos de la línea principal, y que probablemente el expreso no había llegado a tiempo de conectar con el circular. Sofía aguardó treinta y cinco minutos al siguiente circular, pero Cyril no llegó tampoco en aquel tren.

Constanza le abrió la puerta y le enseñó un telegrama:

«Lo siento. Imposible último momento. Sigue carta. Cyril».

Sofía se lo esperaba. Por alguna razón sabía que era inútil esperar el segundo tren. Constanza estaba callada y serena; Sofía también.

«¡Qué vergüenza! ¡Qué vergüenza!», palpitaba el corazón de Sofía.

Era un episodio de lo más común. Pero por debajo de su serenidad estaba furiosa contra su favorito. Vaciló.

—Voy a salir un momento —dijo.

—¿Adonde? —inquirió Constanza—¿No sería mejor que tomáramos el té? Supongo que tendremos que tomar el té.

—No tardaré mucho. Tengo que comprar una cosa.

Sofía fue a correos y puso un telegrama. Después, parcialmente aliviada, regresó a la árida y dolorosa desolación de la casa.

IV

A la tarde siguiente estaba Cyril sentado a la mesa del té, en la sala, con su madre y su tía. Para Constanza, su presencia tenía algo de milagroso. ¡Había venido, después de todo! Sofía llevaba un rico vestido y como adorno una cadena antigua de plata dorada que se abrochaba a la garganta y caía dando dos vueltas hasta la cintura, donde se sujetaba al cinturón. Aquella cadena despertó el interés de Cyril. La mencionó una o dos veces y luego dijo:

—Déjame echar un vistazo a esa cadena —y extendió la mano; Sofía se inclinó hacia delante para que pudiera cogerla. Los dedos del joven jugaron con ella unos segundos; la imagen afectó sorprendentemente a Constanza. Al cabo la soltó y exclamó:

—¡Hum! —Y tras una pausa—: ¿Luis XVI, eh?

—Eso me dijeron —respondió Sofía— Pero no es nada; no me costó más que treinta francos, ¿sabes? — Y Cyril:

—¿Eso qué importa? ¿Se te rompen mucho los eslabones?

—Oh, sí —repuso ella— Cada vez se queda más corta.

Y él murmuró, misteriosamente:

—¡Hum!

Seguía siendo misterioso, retraído dentro de sí mismo, extraordinariamente desinteresado por su entorno físico. Pero aquella tarde habló más de lo que tenía por costumbre. Se mostró benévolo, en especial hacia su madre, forzándose al parecer a contestar sus preguntas de forma completa y sincera, como si admitiese francamente su derecho a ser curiosa. Elogió el té; parecía que se daba cuenta de lo que comía. Se puso a *Mancha* en las rodillas y miró con admiración a *Fossette.*

—¡Cáspita! —exclamó—¡Eso sí que es un perro, sí señor!... De todos modos... —Y estalló en carcajadas.

—No quiero que nadie se ría de *Fossette* —le advirtió Sofía.

—No; en serio —dijo él, en su calidad de aficionado a los perros—, es estupenda. —Aun así no pudo dejar de añadir—: ¡Por lo que se puede ver de ella!

Al oír aquello, Sofía movió la cabeza, reprobando aquella agudeza. Era muy indulgente con él. Su indulgencia se notaba en sus ojos, que seguían constantemente sus movimientos.

—¿Crees que se parece a mí, Constanza? —preguntó a su hermana.

—Ojalá fuera la mitad de guapo que tú —dijo rápidamente Cyril; y Constanza añadió:

—De pequeño se parecía mucho a ti. Era un niño precioso. Cuando estaba en el colegio no se te parecía nada. Estos últimos años ha empezado a parecérsete otra vez. Ha cambiado mucho desde que acabó el colegio; era pesadote y desmañado entonces.

—¡Pesadote y desmañado! —repitió Sofía—, ¡Nunca lo hubiera creído!

—¡Pues lo era! —insistió Constanza.

—Oye, mamá —terció Cyril—, es una lástima que no quieras que se empiece ese pastel. Creo que me habría gustado comerme un trozo. ¡Pero, claro, si está sólo de muestra...!

Constanza se levantó de un salto y cogió un cuchillo.

—No deberías tomar el pelo a tu madre —le reconvino Sofía—. En realidad no quiere, Constanza; se ha atiborrado a base de bien.

Y Cyril estuvo de acuerdo.

—No, no, mamá, no cortes; de verdad que no podría. Sólo estaba haciendo el tonto.

Pero Constanza nunca entendía aquellos rasgos de humor. Cortó tres rebanadas de pastel y le tendió el plato a Cyril.

—¡Si te he dicho que no podía! —protestó.

—¡Vamos! ¡Estoy esperando! ¿Cuánto tiempo me vas a tener con el plato en la mano?

Y el muchacho tuvo que coger una rebanada, al igual que Sofía. Cuando Constanza se enfurecía, los dos tenían que ceder ante ella.

Con los perros, el esplendor de la mesa del té a la luz de gas, la distinción de Sofía y Cyril y la conversación, que era en general alegre y libre, elevándose en ocasiones a un parloteo alborozado, la escena de la sala tendría que haber resultado totalmente satisfactoria para Constanza. Debería ser completamente feliz, ya que la ciática había levantado el asedio durante un tiempo. Pero no lo era. Las circunstancias de la llegada de Cyril la habían perturbado; en realidad la habían herido, aunque no se podía decir que lo admitiera. Por la mañana había recibido una breve carta suya en la que decía que le había sido imposible ir y hacía una vaga promesa de hacerlo en fecha posterior. Aquella carta tenía los defectos cardinales de todas las relaciones de Cyril con su madre; era informal y no era sincera. No daba ninguna indicación de la naturaleza del obstáculo que le había impedido ir. Cyril siempre había sido excesivamente misterioso. Ella se sintió muy deprimida a causa de la carta, que no enseñó a Sofía porque menoscababa su dignidad de madre y daba una mala imagen de su hijo. Después, hacia las once, había llegado un telegrama para Sofía.

—¡Qué bien! —había dicho Sofía al leerlo—. ¡Estará aquí esta tarde! —Y había pasado a su hermana el telegrama, que decía:

«Muy bien. Llegaré hoy en algún tren».

Y Constanza se enteró de que cuando Sofía salió a toda prisa justo antes del té, la tarde anterior, era para telegrafiar a Cyril.

—¿Qué le dijiste? —inquirió Constanza.

—¡Oh! —exclamó Sofía, con aire despreocupado— Le dije que pensaba que debía venir. ¡Al fin y al cabo, tú eres más importante que cualquier «negocio», Constanza! Y no me gusta que se porte así. ¡Estaba decidida a que viniera!

Sofía sacudió su orgullosa cabeza.

Constanza hizo como si estuviese complacida y agradecida. Pero era innegable que existía una herida. ¡Así que Sofía tenía más ascendiente con Cyril que ella! Sofía sólo lo había visto una vez y se lo había metido en el bolsillo. Nunca habría hecho tanto por su madre. ¡Vaya un obstáculo el suyo, si un simple telegrama de Sofía pudo vencerlo...! Y Sofía también era misteriosa. Había salido a telegrafiar y no había dicho ni una palabra hasta que tuvo contestación, al cabo de dieciséis horas. Se parecían. Se agradaban. Pero Sofía era una curiosa mezcla. Cuando Constanza le preguntó si iba a ir otra vez a la estación a recibir a Cyril, le respondió desdeñosamente:

—¡Desde luego que no! Se acabó eso de ir a recibirlo. Las personas que no se presentan no deben esperar que se las vaya a recibir.

Cuando Cyril llegó ante la puerta, Sofía estaba aguardándolo. Bajó la escalera corriendo.

—No digas nada de mi telegrama —susurró rápidamente a Cyril; no había tiempo para más explicaciones. Constanza estaba en lo alto de la escalera; no había oído el cuchicheo pero lo había visto, como también una expresión culpable y desconcertada en el rostro de Cyril y luego, en el rostro de ambos, un aire de conspiradores, ineficazmente disimulado. ¡Había «algo entre ellos» de lo que ella, la madre, estaba

excluida! ¿No era natural que se sintiese herida? Era demasiado orgullosa para mencionar los telegramas, y como ni Cyril ni Sofía los mencionaron, no se hizo alusión alguna a las circunstancias que habían conducido al cambio de planes de Cyril, lo cual fue muy curioso. Y luego, Cyril era más sociable que en toda su vida; era diferente bajo la mirada de su tía. Cierto era que su forma de tratar a su madre era impecable. Pero Constanza se decía: «Es porque está ella por lo que es tan amable conmigo».

Cuando concluyó el té y subieron al salón, le preguntó, mirando el grabado del «Ciervo en el crepúsculo»:

—Y bien, ¿qué tal queda?

—¿Qué? —su mirada siguió la de ella—, ¡Ah, lo has cambiado! ¿Para qué lo has hecho, madre?

—Tú dijiste que estaría mejor así —le recordó ella.

—¿De veras? —parecía auténticamente sorprendido—. No me acuerdo. Creo que está mejor, de todas maneras —añadió—. Quizá estaría aún mejor si lo pusieras del revés.

Hizo una mueca a Sofía y se encogió de hombros, como indicando: «¡Sí que la he hecho buena esta vez!».

—¿Cómo? ¿Del revés? —inquirió Constanza. Después, al comprender que le estaba tomando el pelo, dijo—: ¡Anda ya! —e hizo como si le tirara de las orejas—, ¡Bien que te gustaba ese grabado, en tiempos! —dijo con ironía.

—Sí, es verdad, mamá —asintió, sumiso—. Eso no lo he olvidado. —Y oprimió las mejillas de ella entre sus manos y las besó.

En el salón estuvo fumando cigarrillos y tocando al piano valses que él mismo había compuesto. Constanza y Sofía no comprendían del todo aquellos valses. Pero estaban de acuerdo en que todos eran maravillosos y uno verdaderamente precioso. (A Constanza la tranquilizaba el que la opinión de Sofía coincidiera con la suya.) Él dijo que aquel vals era el peor de todos. Cuando terminó con el piano, Constanza le informó acerca de Amy.

—¡Oh! Me lo contó —dijo él— cuando me trajo el agua. No lo he mencionado porque pensé que era un tema bastante delicado —Tras su tono informal se escondía una cierta curiosidad, un deseo de enterarse de los detalles. Se enteró.

A las diez menos cinco, cuando Constanza empezaba a bostezar, lanzó una bomba en medio de ellas, sobre la alfombra.

—Bien —empezó—, he quedado con Matthew en el Club Conservador a las diez. Tengo que irme. No me esperéis levantadas.

Las dos mujeres protestaron, Sofía más vivamente. Ahora era ella la que se sentía herida.

—Es un negocio —dijo él a modo de defensa—. Se marcha mañana temprano y no tengo otra oportunidad. —Y como Constanza no se animaba, prosiguió—: Hay que atender a los negocios. No creáis que no tengo otra cosa que hacer más que pasármelo bien.

¡Ni palabra acerca de la naturaleza del negocio! Nunca daba explicaciones. En cuanto a negocios, Constanza sólo sabía que le pasaba una asignación de trescientas libras al año y le pagaba el sastre local. La suma le había parecido enorme al principio, pero había acabado por acostumbrarse.

—Hubiera preferido que vieras al señor Peel-Swynnerton aquí —dijo Constanza— Podríais haber tenido una habitación para estar a solas. No me gusta que salgas a las diez de la noche para ir a un club.

—Bien; buenas noches, mamá —dijo él, poniéndose en pie—. Hasta mañana. Me llevaré la llave de la puerta. Claro que mi bolsillo nunca volverá a ser el mismo.

Sofía acompañó a Constanza a la cama y le puso dos botellas de agua caliente contra la ciática. No hablaron gran cosa.

Sofía estaba esperando, sentada en el sofá de la sala. Le parecía que, aunque había pasado poco más de un mes desde su llegada a Bursley, se había amoldado ya a una serie de nuevos intereses e inquietudes. París y su antigua vida se habían alejado de la manera más extraña. A veces se olvidaba por completo de París durante horas. El pensar en París le resultaba desconcertante, pues o París o Bursley habían de ser por fuerza irreales. Mientras aguardaba en el sofá, París no cesaba de acudir a su mente. Era sin duda sorprendente que estuviera tan preocupada por sus planes para el bienestar de Constanza como lo había llegado a estar por los planes para la mejora de la Pensión Frensham. Se dijo: «Mi vida ha sido muy rara; sin embargo, cada parte de ella, por separado, parecía bastante corriente... ¿Cómo terminará?».

Entonces se oyeron pasos en los escalones de la calle y alguien metió la llave en la cerradura; Sofía abrió al momento la puerta.

—¡Oh! —exclamó Cyril, sobresaltado y perdiendo un poco la compostura—, ¡Todavía estás levantada! Gracias. —Entró, fumando la colilla de un cigarro—: ¡Imagínate, tener que cargar con esto! —murmuró, levantando la llave, grande y anticuada, y metiéndola desde dentro en la cerradura.

—Me he quedado —dijo Sofía— porque quería hablar de tu madre contigo y es muy difícil tener una oportunidad.

Cyril sonrió, no sin timidez, y se dejó caer en la mecedora de su madre tras darle la vuelta con los pies para que quedara frente al sofá.

—Sí —asintió—; me preguntaba qué quería decir en realidad tu telegrama. ¿Qué era? —Echó una bocanada de humo y esperó la respuesta.

—Pensé que debías venir —dijo Sofía, animadamente pero con firmeza—. Para tu madre fue una terrible decepción que no vinieras ayer. Y cuando espera carta tuya y no llega, se pone enferma.

—¡Ah, es eso! —dijo él—. Me alegro de que no sea peor. Por tu telegrama pensé que pasaba algo grave. Y luego, cuando me dijiste que no lo mencionara... cuando llegué...

Ella vio que no se hacía cargo de la situación y alzó la cabeza desafiante.

—Descuidas a tu madre, muchacho —aseveró.

—¡Oh, vamos, tiíta! —respondió, muy afable— No debes decir eso. Le escribo todas las semanas. No he fallado ni una semana. Vengo tan a menudo como...

—A veces sí fallas —le interrumpió ella.

—Tal vez —admitió él, receloso—, Pero ¿qué..?

—¿No comprendes que ella vive únicamente para tus cartas? ¡Y si una no llega, se disgusta mucho..., no puede ni comer! ¡Y le causa un ataque de ciática, y no sé qué más!

Su tono atrevido y directo dejó perplejo al joven.

—Pero ¡eso es una tontería! Un hombre no puede estar siempre...

—Quizá sea una tontería. Pero así son las cosas. No puedes hacerla cambiar. Y, al fin y al cabo, ¿qué te costaría ser más atento, incluso escribirle dos veces a la semana? ¡No irás a decirme que estás tan ocupado que no puedes! Sé mucho más de los jóvenes que tu madre. —Sonrió como una tía.

Él respondió a la suya con una sonrisa tímida.

—¡Si pudieras ponerte en el lugar de tu madre...!

—Supongo que tienes toda la razón —dijo él al fin—. Y te estoy muy agradecido por habérmelo dicho. ¿Cómo iba yo a saberlo? —Arrojó la colilla al fuego con un amplio ademán.

—¡Bueno, pues ya lo sabes! —dijo, cortante; pensó: «Debería haberlo sabido. Era de su incumbencia saberlo». Pero le gustó la manera en que había aceptado su crítica, y el ademán con que había tirado la colilla

le pareció muy distinguido.

—¡Perfectamente! —dijo él, somnoliento, como si dijera «solucionado», y se puso en pie.

Sofía, sin embargo, no se movió.

—La salud de tu madre no está como debería —continuó, y le contó toda la conversación que había tenido con el médico.

—¿De verdad? —murmuró Cyril, apoyando el codo en la chimenea y bajando la mirada hacia ella— ¿Es cierto que Stirling dijo eso? Yo hubiera creído que donde mejor estaría es donde está, en la Plaza.

—¿Por qué en la Plaza?

—¡Oh, no lo sé!

—¡Ni yo tampoco!

—Siempre ha estado aquí.

—Sí —dijo Sofía—; lleva aquí demasiado tiempo.

—¿Qué sugieres tú? —preguntó Cyril, revelando en su voz un sentimiento de impaciencia ante aquella nueva preocupación que se le venía encima.

—Bien —dijo Sofía—: ¿qué te parecería que se fuera a Londres a vivir contigo?

Cyril retrocedió, dando un respingo. Sofía vio que estaba verdaderamente sorprendido.

—No creo que eso sea en absoluto la solución —dijo.

—¿Por qué?

—¡Oh! No creo que lo sea. Londres no le sentaría bien. No es ese tipo de mujer. Yo estaba convencido de que estaba perfectamente aquí. No le gustaría Londres. —Movió la cabeza, mirando a la lámpara; sus ojos tenían un brillo peligroso.

—Pero ¿y si ella dijera que lo iba a hacer?

—Mira —empezó Cyril, en un tono distinto y muy animado—, ¿por qué no os establecéis tú y ella juntas en alguna parte? Eso sería muy...

Volvió la cabeza bruscamente. Se produjo un ruido en la escalera y la puerta que daba a ésta se abrió con su eterno crujido.

—Sí —dijo Sofía—. Los Campos Elíseos empiezan en la Plaza de la Concordia y terminan... ¿Eres tú, Constanza?

La figura de Constanza llenó el hueco. Su rostro mostraba una expresión confusa. Había oído a Cyril en la calle y había bajado a ver por qué permanecía tanto tiempo en la sala. Le sorprendió encontrar a Sofía con él. ¡Allí estaban, tan íntimos como un par de compinches, charlando sobre París!

—Creía que estabas en la cama y durmiendo, Sofía —dijo débilmente—. Es casi la una.

—No —dijo Sofía—; no me apetecía acostarme, y luego dio la casualidad de que llegó Cyril.

Pero ni ella ni Cyril pudieron aparentar inocencia. Y la mirada de Constanza fue de uno a otro con aprensión.

A la mañana siguiente, Cyril recibió una carta que, según dijo —sin dar más explicaciones—, lo obligaba a partir al instante. Dio a entender que había sido arriesgado visitarlas precisamente entonces y que las cosas habían resultado como temía.

—Piensa lo que te dije —musitó a Sofía un momento que estuvieron a solas —y házmelo saber.

VI

Una semana antes de Pascua, los huéspedes del Hotel Rutland, en Broad Walk, Buxton, reunidos para tomar el té en el «salón» de dicho establecimiento, fueron testigos de la llegada de dos damas de mediana edad y dos perros. Examinar críticamente a los recién llegados era una de las diversiones de los ocupantes del salón. Este aposento, amueblado en «estilo oriental», ofrecía un hermoso espectáculo entre las fotografías de los folletos ilustrados del hotel y, aunque lleno de corrientes de aire, era el favorito de los espacios públicos de éste. Tenía corrientes porque sólo estaba separado de la calle (si se puede llamar calle a Broad Walk) por dos pares de puertas batientes, de las que se ocupaban sendos botones. Todo visitante que entraba en el hotel se veía obligado a pasar por el salón, y para los recién llegados pasar por él era toda una prueba; se les hacía sentir como si tuvieran mucho que aprender, mucho a lo que acostumbrarse; como los pasajeros que abordan un barco que toca puerto, veían ante sí la tarea de hacerse un hueco en una sociedad hostil y altiva. Las dos señoras produjeron una impresión muy favorable desde un principio a causa de sus perros. No todo el mundo tiene el valor de llevar perros a un costoso hotel privado; llevar un perro indica que uno no está habituado a negarse pequeños placeres por unos pocos chelines de más; llevar dos indica que uno no tiene miedo a los gerentes de hotel y que tiene costumbre de considerar su capricho como una ley de la naturaleza. La más baja y gruesa de las dos damas no se impuso con mucha fuerza en la visión colectiva del Rutland; vestía de negro, no a la moda, aunque con una riqueza sin pretensiones; sus gestos eran tímidos y nerviosos; era evidente que se acogía a la protección de su alta compañera en sus primeros y duros contactos con la vida de hotel. La dama alta tenía un aire muy diferente. Bella, majestuosa, pausada y magníficamente vestida de color, tenía la mirada fría y segura de una persona que está totalmente acostumbrada a la inspección de los extraños. Preguntó en tono cortante a uno de los botones por el gerente; en respuesta, la mujer de éste bajó la escalera a tropezones y se condujo con llamativa deferencia. La dama hablaba en voz baja y autoritaria, la voz de quien da órdenes que son obedecidas. La opinión del salón en cuanto a si eran o no hermanas estaba dividida.

Desaparecieron en silencio acompañando a la mujer del gerente y no acudieron a tomar el té en el salón; de todas formas no se habría podido beber por estar pasado. Se supo entonces, por medio de uno de esos huéspedes que hay en todos los hoteles y que se enteran de los secretos del hotel valiéndose de la curiosidad del personal, que las dos señoras habían reservado dos habitaciones, las número 17 y 18, y la suntuosa sala privada con balcón del primer piso, denominada «C» en la nomenclatura de las habitaciones. Este hecho establecía definitivamente la posición de las recién llegadas en la estructura moral del hotel. Eran ricas. Tenían dinero a espuertas. Pues ni siquiera en un hotel selecto como el Rutland todo el mundo se da el gusto de tener una sala privada; sólo había cuatro de estos aposentos en un hotel que, en comparación, contaba con cincuenta habitaciones.

En la cena dispusieron de una pequeña mesa para ellas solas. La más baja llevaba un chal blanco sobre los hombros. Sus modales, casi contritos, durante la colación confirmaron la opinión de que debía de ser una persona muy sencilla, poco habituada al mundo y a sus usos. La otra seguía siendo señorial. Pidió media botella de vino y bebió dos copas. Miraba en torno suyo sin un adarme de timidez, mientras que la otra dividía sus miradas entre su compañera y su plato. No hablaron mucho. Inmediatamente después de cenar se retiraron. «Viudas en holgada posición», fue el veredicto, pero el contraste entre las dos contenía enigmas que picaban a los curiosos.

Sofía había vencido de nuevo. Una vez más, había decidido conseguir una cosa y la había conseguido. Los acontecimientos se habían sucedido así. El anuncio en la *Señal* pidiendo una criada para todo había sido un fracaso descorazonador. Se recibieron algunas respuestas, pero totalmente insatisfactorias. Constanza, mucho más que Sofía, se había quedado pasmada al ver el porte y las exigencias de las sirvientas modernas. Constanza estaba desesperada. Si no hubiese sido tan orgullosa, hubiera estado dispuesta a sugerir a Sofía que pidieran a Amy que se quedase. Pero Constanza habría aceptado antes a una de aquellas descaradas mozas modernas. Fue María Critchlow la que sacó del apuro a Constanza dándole detalles de una sirvienta de fiar que estaba a punto de dejar una colocación en la que llevaba casi ocho años. Constanza no se figuraba que una criada recomendada por María Critchlow le fuera a convenir, pero, como se hallaba en un dilema, se comprometió a verla y ella y Sofía quedaron muy complacidas con la muchacha, llamada Rosa Bennion. El engorro era que Rosa no estaría libre hasta un mes después de la marcha de Amy. Rosa había dejado su antiguo empleo, pero estaba empeñada en ir a Manchester a pasar quince días con una hermana casada antes de instalarse en una nueva casa. Constanza y Sofía pensaban que el capricho de Rosa era verdaderamente fastidioso e innecesario. Desde luego, podrían haber pedido a Amy que se quedara sólo un mes. Probablemente Amy se habría ofrecido a hacerlo de haber conocido las circunstancias. Sin embargo, no conocía las circunstancias. Y Constanza estaba decidida a no deberle nada a Amy. ¿Qué podían hacer las hermanas? Sofía, que dirigió todas las entrevistas con Rosa y otras candidatas, dijo que sería un grave error

dejar escapar a Rosa. Además, no tenían a nadie que ocupase su lugar, a nadie que fuera inmediatamente.

El dilema era terrible. Al final así le pareció a Constanza, que creía sinceramente que ninguna señora se había visto jamás «en tan embarazoso aprieto». Y sin embargo, la primera vez que Sofía propuso su solución, Constanza consideró que era una solución imposible. La idea de Sofía era que cerraran la casa y se marcharan el mismo día que Amy la abandonara, para pasar unas semanas en algún lugar de vacaciones. Para empezar, la idea de dejar la casa vacía le parecía a Constanza una locura. La casa nunca había estado vacía. Y luego, ¡irse de vacaciones en abril! Constanza nunca se había ido de vacaciones excepto en el mes de agosto. ¡No! El proyecto estaba erizado de dificultades y peligros que no podían ser vencidos ni previstos.

Por ejemplo: «No podemos volver a una casa sucia» y «no podemos tener aquí a una criada extraña antes de llegar nosotras». A lo cual Sofía replicó: «Entonces, ¿qué piensas hacer?». Y Constanza, tras prodigiosa reflexión, en el aterrador extremo al que la había llevado el destino, dijo que suponía que tendrían que arreglárselas con una asistenta hasta la llegada de Rosa. Preguntó a Sofía si se acordaba de la vieja Maggie. Naturalmente, Sofía se acordaba perfectamente. La vieja Maggie había muerto, como también el afable y borrachín Hollins, pero había una joven Maggie (esposa de un albañil) que salía a limpiar casas en el tiempo que le quedaba libre de cuidar a sus siete hijos. Cuanto más meditaba Constanza acerca de la joven Maggie, más convencida estaba de que la joven Maggie era la solución. Constanza pensaba que podía confiar en la joven Maggie.

El expresar confianza en Maggie fue la perdición de Constanza. ¿Por qué no se iban y acordaban con Maggie que fuera a la casa, unos días antes de su regreso, a limpiar y ventilar? El peso de la razón abrumó a Constanza. Cedió de mala gana, pero cedió. Fue la alusión a Buxton lo que al final la decidió. Conocía Buxton. Su antigua casera de Buxton había muerto y Constanza no había visitado la ciudad desde la muerte de Samuel; no obstante, su nombre tenía a sus oídos un sonido tranquilizador, y era reconocido que, para la ciática, sus aguas y su clima eran los mejores de Inglaterra. Poco a poco Constanza se fue dejando embarcar en esa peligrosa empresa de cerrar la casa durante veinticinco días. Comunicó la información a Amy, que se quedó atónita. Luego empezó con sus preparativos domésticos. Envolvió la Biblia familiar de Samuel en papel marrón; guardó en un cajón la copia de Cyril de sir Edward Landseer con marco de paja y tomó otras diez mil precauciones. Era grotesco; era absurdo; era lo que queráis. Y cuando, con el coche a la puerta y el equipaje en el coche, y los perros atados juntos, y María Critchlow esperando en la acera para hacerse cargo de la llave, Constanza metió ésta en la cerradura desde fuera y cerró la casa desierta, el rostro de Constanza era trágico y expresaba innumerables temores. Y Sofía pensó que había hecho un milagro. Así era.

En términos generales, las hermanas fueron bien recibidas en el hotel, aunque no estaban en una edad que exija popularidad. En la crítica a que fueron sometidas —la libre, realista e implacable crítica de los hoteles—, primero se calificó a Sofía de dominante. Pero a los pocos días esta opinión fue modificada y Sofía aumentó en la estima de los huéspedes. El hecho fue que el comportamiento de Sofía cambió pasadas cuarenta y ocho horas. El Hotel Rutland era muy bueno. Era tan bueno que modificó la honda creencia de Sofía de que en el mundo sólo había una pensión que fuese verdaderamente de primera categoría y de que nadie podía enseñar nada sobre el arte de la gerencia a la creadora de aquella pensión única. La comida era excelente; el servicio de habitaciones era excelente (y Sofía sabía lo difícil que es tener un servicio de habitaciones excelente); y el interior del Rutland ofrecía a los ojos un espectáculo de mucha más riqueza que la Pensión Frensham. El nivel de comodidad era superior. Los huéspedes tenían un aspecto más distinguido. Cierto es que los precios eran mucho más elevados. Sofía fue humillada. Tuvo suficiente sentido común para ajustar su perspectiva. Además, se halló ignorante de muchas cuestiones que los demás huéspedes daban por sentadas y que utilizaban como base para la conversación. Una prolongada residencia en París no justificaba esta ignorancia; antes bien, parecía intensificar lo extraña que resultaba. Así, cuando alguien de experiencia cosmopolita, al enterarse de que había vivido en París muchos años, le preguntó qué se había estrenado últimamente en la Comédie Française, tuvo que admitir que no había pisado un teatro francés en casi treinta años. Y cuando, un domingo, la misma persona le preguntó por el capellán inglés de París, hete aquí que no sabía otra cosa que su nombre y no lo había visto nunca. La vida de Sofía, a su manera, había sido tan estrecha como la de Constanza. Aunque su experiencia de la naturaleza humana era amplia, había estado sumida en un estancamiento tan profundo como el de Constanza. Había estado totalmente absorbida en hacer una única cosa.

Por acuerdo tácito se había encargado de los trámites. Pagaba todas las facturas. Constanza protestó varias veces de lo caro que era, pero Sofía la tranquilizó valiéndose de la simple fuerza de su personalidad. Constanza tenía una sola ventaja sobre Sofía. Conocía muy bien Buxton y el barrio y por lo tanto estaba en situación de hacerse cargo de las visitas a los lugares de interés y ocuparse de las peculiaridades locales. En todos los demás aspectos mandaba Sofía.

Muy pronto se aclimataron al hotel. Se movían con comodidad entre alfombras de Turquía y techos con escayolas; sus ojos se habituaron a la eterna visión en espejos de marco dorado de sus propias imágenes y

las de otras dignidades que se movían con lentitud, a la pesadez de los grandes cuadros al óleo con paisajes pintorescos, a los indicios de polvo furtivo detrás de los enormes muebles, al tono pardo grisáceo de las pecheras de los camareros, a las bandejas, botas y cubos esparcidos por los largos pasillos; sus oídos estaban siempre alerta a los sonidos de gongs y campanas. Consultaban el barómetro y pedían el diario carruaje con la indiferencia que da la costumbre. Descubrieron lo que se puede aprender de los trabajos de aguja ajenos en un hotel en un día lluvioso. Invitaron a otros huéspedes a su sala. Cuando había un espectáculo no lo rehuían. Sofía estaba decidida a hacer todo lo que fuera decoroso hacer, en parte como válvula de escape para su propia energía (que se había ido acumulando desde que saliera de París), pero más por Constanza. Recordaba todo lo que le había dicho el doctor Stirling y con cuánto entusiasmo se había ella mostrado de acuerdo con sus opiniones. Fue un gran día aquel en el cual, bajo la tutela de una dama de edad y en la intimidad de su sala, empezaron ambas a estudiar los fundamentos de los solitarios. Ninguna de las dos había jugado jamás a las cartas. A Constanza casi le daba miedo tocarlas, como si en el mismo cartón hubiera algo peligroso y falto de rectitud. Pero la respetabilidad de un lujoso hotel privado hace que cualquier acto que tenga lugar dentro de sus paredes se tome decoroso. Y Constanza argumentó de forma convincente que no puede venir ningún mal de un juego que uno juega por su cuenta. Aprendió, con cierta aptitud, diversas variedades de solitarios. Dijo: «Creo que podría llegar a gustarme si siguiera con ello. Pero hace que me dé vueltas la cabeza».

Sin embargo, Constanza no era feliz en el hotel. Estaba constantemente preocupada por su casa vacía. Preveía dificultades e incluso desastres. Se preguntaba una y otra vez si podría confiar en la segunda Maggie, sola en su casa; si no sería mejor regresar antes y participar personalmente en la limpieza. Hubiera decidido hacerlo así de no haber titubeado en someter a Sofía a las incomodidades de una casa patas arriba. Tenía la cuestión siempre presente. Siempre estaba pensando con impaciencia en el día de la marcha. Había dejado su corazón en la Plaza de San Lucas. Nunca había vivido en un hotel y no le gustaba. La ciática la acosaba de vez en cuando. Sin embargo, cuando se trató de ello, no quiso tomar las aguas. Dijo que nunca las había tomado y al parecer consideraba esto como una razón para no tomarlas nunca. Sofía había hecho un milagro llevándola a Buxton a pasar casi un mes, pero el grandioso efecto final carecía de brillantez.

Entonces llegó la carta fatal, la carta desoladora, que hacía buenas las negras aprensiones de Constanza. Rosa Bennion les escribió para decirles con toda tranquilidad que había decidido no volver a la Plaza de San Lucas. Se lamentaba por cualquier molestia que ello pudiera causar; era muy cortés. Pero ¡qué monstruosidad! Constanza pensó que aquello era cierta y verdaderamente el abismo más hondo de sus calamidades. ¡Allí estaba ella lejos de una casa sucia, sin criada ni perspectiva de tenerla! Se condujo con valentía, con nobleza, pero fue un duro golpe para ella. Quería volver a la casa sucia enseguida.

Sofía entendió que la situación creada por aquella carta exigía que pusiera en juego sus mayores facultades para hacer frente a situaciones y decidió hacer frente a ésta como es debido. Era preciso aplicar grandes remedios, pues estaban en juego la salud y la felicidad de Constanza. Sólo ella era capaz de actuar. Sabía que no podía contar con Cyril. Seguía teniendo una gran debilidad por él; creía que era el joven más encantador que había conocido en su vida; sabía que era ingenioso e inteligente, pero en sus relaciones con su madre había una cierta dureza, un toque de insensibilidad. Se lo explicaba vagamente diciéndose que «no se llevaban bien», lo cual era extraño teniendo en cuenta el carácter amable y cariñoso de Constanza. Sin embargo, su hermana podía sacarlo a uno de quicio un poco, algunas veces. De todas maneras, a Sofía le quedó pronto claro que la idea de que madre e hijo vivieran juntos en Londres era enteramente inviable. ¡No! Si había que salvar a Constanza de sí misma, nadie más que Sofía era capaz de hacerlo.

Después de media mañana dedicada principalmente a escuchar los comentarios de Constanza acerca de la monstruosa carta, Sofía dijo de improviso que tenía que sacar a los perros a tomar el aire. Constanza no se sentía con fuerzas para caminar y tampoco le apetecía salir en coche. No quería que Sofía se «aventurara», pues el cielo estaba amenazador. Sin embargo, Sofía se aventuró; llegó al almuerzo con unos minutos de retraso, llena de vigor y con dos perros muy contentos. Constanza la aguardaba, taciturna, en el comedor. No pudo comer. Peto Sofía comió, derrochando animación y energía como de una fuente inextinguible. Después del almuerzo empezó a llover. Constanza dijo que pensaba retirarse directamente a la sala. «Yo voy también», dijo Sofía, que todavía llevaba puestos el sombrero y el abrigo y los guantes en la mano. En la sala, de aspecto pretencioso y banal, se sentaron a ambos lados de la chimenea. Constanza se echó un pequeño chal sobre los hombros, se sujetó las gafas metiéndolas entre los grises cabellos y dejó escapar un enorme suspiro:

—¡Ay, Dios mío! —Era la musa trágica, envejecida y ataviada de seda negra.

—¿Sabes lo que he estado pensando? —empezó Sofía, plegando los guantes.

—¿Qué? —preguntó Constanza, esperando que alguna solución maravillosa saliera del activo cerebro de Sofía.

—No hay ninguna razón en el mundo para que vuelvas a Bursley. La casa no se va a ir de allí y ahora

no cuesta nada más que el alquiler. ¿Por qué no te tomas las cosas con calma por un tiempo?

—¿Y quedarnos aquí? —dijo Constanza, con una inflexión que reveló a Sofía la intensidad del desagrado que le causaba la vida en el Rutland.

—No; aquí no —negó Sofía con rápido menosprecio—. Hay muchos otros sitios donde podríamos ir.

—No creo que estuviera tranquila —reconoció Constanza—, Entre que todo estaría en el aire y que la casa...

—Pero ¿qué importa la casa?

—Importa mucho —repuso Constanza con seriedad y un poco ofendida—. No dejé las cosas como si fuéramos a estar mucho tiempo ausentes. No podría ser.

—¡No veo que vaya a pasar nada, la verdad! —dijo Sofía, persuasiva—, Al fin y al cabo, la suciedad siempre se puede limpiar. Creo que deberías salir más. Te haría bien, todo el bien del mundo. Y no hay ninguna razón para que no puedas ir donde quieras. Eres totalmente libre. ¿Por qué no íbamos a irnos juntas al extranjero, por ejemplo, tú y yo? Estoy segura de que te encamaría.

—¿Al extranjero? —murmuró Constanza, horrorizada, retrocediendo ante la propuesta como si fuese un grave peligro.

—Sí —insistió Sofía, con vivacidad y ansiosa. Estaba decidida a llevar a Constanza al extranjero—. Hay muchos sitios donde podríamos ir y donde podríamos vivir cómodamente entre ingleses agradables. —Pensó en los lugares de vacaciones que había visitado con Gerald en los años sesenta. Se le habían antojado ciudades de ensueño. Acudieron a su mente como un recurso de ensueño.

—No creo que me convenga ir al extranjero —dijo Constanza.

—Pero ¿por qué no? No lo sabes. Nunca lo has intentado, querida. —Sonrió alentadoramente. Pero Constanza no sonrió. Se inclinaba a mostrarse sombría.

—No creo que me conviniera —dijo, obstinadamente—. Yo soy una de esas personas caseras. No soy como tú. No todos podemos ser iguales —añadió, con su acento «ácido».

Sofía dominó un sentimiento de irritación. Sabía que tenía una personalidad más fuerte que Constanza.

—Bien; entonces —continuó, con el mismo tono persuasivo— en Inglaterra o Escocia. Hay varios sitios que me gustaría visitar: Torquay, Turnbridge Wells. Siempre he tenido entendido que Turnbridge Wells es una ciudad muy bonita, con una gente estupenda y un clima magnífico.

—Creo que tendré que regresar a la Plaza de San Lucas —dijo Constanza, haciendo caso omiso de todo lo que había dicho Sofía—, Hay mucho que hacer.

Entonces Sofía miró a Constanza con aire más serio y resuelto, pero aun así amable, como si la mirara por su propio bien.

—Estás cometiendo un error, Constanza —afirmó—, si me permites que te lo diga.

—¡Un error! —exclamó Constanza, sorprendida.

—Un error muy grande —insistió Sofía, observando que estaba creando efecto.

—No veo cómo puedo estar cometiendo un error —repuso Constanza, ganando confianza en sí misma, ya que daba el asunto por terminado.

—No —dijo Sofía—, estoy segura de que no lo ves. Pero es así. Ya sabes, eres un poco propensa a dejarte esclavizar por esa casa tuya. En vez de que la casa exista para ti, tú existes para la casa.

—¡Oh! ¡Sofía! —murmuró Constanza, incómoda—¡Pero qué ideas tienes! —Nerviosa, se puso en pie y cogió una labor de bordado, poniéndose las gafas y tosiendo. Se volvió a sentar y dijo—: Nadie podría tomarse las cosas con más calma que yo, por lo que se refiere al gobierno de la casa. Te puedo asegurar que dejo pasar docenas de asuntos pequeños en vez de molestarme.

—Entonces, ¿por qué te molestas ahora? —la interrogó Sofía.

—No puedo dejar así la casa —Constanza se sentía herida.

—Hay una cosa que no puedo comprender —continuó Sofía, alzando la cabeza y fijando de nuevo la vista en Constanza—, y es, sencillamente, por qué vives en la Plaza de San Lucas.

—En alguna parte tengo que vivir. Y estoy segura de que es muy agradable.

—¡Con todo ese humo! ¡Y esa suciedad! Y la casa es muy vieja.

—Está mucho mejor construida que muchas de esas casas nuevas que hay junto al parque —replicó Constanza con acritud. A pesar de sí misma, le molestaba que criticaran su casa. Le molestaba incluso la palmaria verdad de que era vieja.

—Por ejemplo, nunca conseguirás que una criada se quede en esa cocina, que parece un sótano —dijo Sofía, conservando la calma.

—¡Oh! ¡Eso no lo sé! ¡Eso no lo sé! Esa mujer, Bennion, no puso ningún inconveniente. De todas maneras, para ti está muy bien hablar así, Sofía. Pero yo conozco Bursley quizá mejor que tú. —Su voz se volvió áspera nuevamente—. Y te puedo asegurar que mi casa se considera muy buena.

—¡Oh! No digo que no lo sea. Pero tú estarías mejor lejos de ella. Todo el mundo lo dice.

—¿Todo el mundo? —Constanza levantó la vista, soltando su labor—. ¿Quién? ¿Quién habla de mí?

—Bueno —contestó Sofía—, el médico, por ejemplo.

—¿El doctor Stirling? ¡Muy bonito! No hace más que decir que el de Bursley es uno de los climas más sanos de Inglaterra. No hace más que defender a Bursley.

—El doctor Stirling piensa que deberías salir más, no pasarte la vida en esa casa oscura. —Si Sofía hubiera reflexionado lo suficiente, no habría utilizado el adjetivo «oscura». No ayudó a su causa.

—¡Oh, eso dice! —exclamó Constanza desdeñosamente— Bien, pues si al doctor Stirling le interesa, me gusta mi casa oscura.

—¿No te ha dicho nunca que deberías salir más? —persistió Sofía.

—Tal vez lo haya mencionado —admitió de mala gana Constanza.

—Cuando estuvo hablando conmigo hizo mucho más que mencionarlo. Y quiero contarte lo que dijo.

—¡Hazlo! —dijo Constanza cortésmente.

—No te das cuenta de lo serio que es esto, me temo —prosiguió Sofía—, No puedes verlo por ti misma. —Titubeó un momento. Como la inflexión de la voz de Constanza al decir «mi casa oscura» le había agitado la sangre, su juicio estaba ligeramente confuso. Decidió dar a Constanza una versión completa de la conversación que había mantenido con el médico.

—Se trata de tu salud —concluyó—. Creo que era mi deber hablarte en serio y así lo he hecho. Espero que comprendas cuál ha sido mi intención.

—¡Oh, desde luego! —se apresuró a afirmar Constanza. Y pensó: «No llevamos juntas ni tres meses y ya está tratando de tenerme en un puño».

Se produjo una pausa. Al cabo dijo Sofía:

—No hay duda de que tu ciática y tus palpitaciones se deben a los nervios. Y dejas que tus nervios se pongan en ese estado porque te preocupas por fruslerías. Un cambio te haría muchísimo bien. Es justo lo que necesitas. De verdad, Constanza, debes admitir que la idea de vivir siempre en un sitio como la Plaza de San Lucas, cuando tienes total libertad para hacer lo que quieras e ir adonde gustes..., debes admitir que es demasiado.

Constanza apretó los labios y se inclinó sobre su bordado.

—Y bien, ¿qué dices? —la conminó amablemente Sofía.

—¡A algunos nos gusta Bursley, por negro que esté! —repuso Constanza. Y a Sofía la sorprendió su voz

llorosa.

—¡Vamos, querida Constanza! —la reconvino.

—¡Es inútil! —exclamó Constanza, arrojando de repente su labor y dejando fluir las lágrimas. Tenía el rostro crispado. Se estaba portando como una niña—. ¡Es inútil! Tengo que volver a casa y ocuparme de mis cosas. Es inútil. Aquí estamos tirando el dinero. Es un verdadero pecado. ¡Paseos, coches, extras! Un chelín al día extra por cada perro. En mi vida he visto cosa semejante. Y preferiría irme a casa cuanto antes. Eso es. Preferiría irme a casa cuanto antes. —Era la primera referencia que hacía Constanza en mucho tiempo a la cuestión de los gastos, y con mucho la más violenta. Enfureció a Sofía.

—Consideraremos que estás aquí como mi invitada —dijo con altivez—, si es así como lo ves.

—¡Oh, no! —se opuso Constanza— No es por el dinero por lo que me quejo. Oh, no, no haremos eso. —Y sus lágrimas se hicieron más copiosas.

—Sí, lo haremos —recalcó fríamente Sofía—, Sólo te lo he dicho por tu bien. Yo...

—Bien —la interrumpió Constanza con desesperación—; me gustaría que no trataras de dominarme.

—¡Dominarte! —exclamó Sofía, horrorizada—. Bueno, Constanza, esto ya es...

Se levantó y se fue a su habitación, donde estaban encerrados los perros, que huyeron a la escalera. Ella estaba temblando de emoción. ¡Esto era lo que se sacaba de ayudar a los demás! Era increíble. ¡Constanza! ¡Desde luego era muy injusta y no era propio de ella! Y Sofía alentó en su seno el sentimiento de haber sufrido una injusticia. Pero una voz no cesaba de decirle: «Lo has hecho muy mal. Esta vez no la has conquistado. Estás vencida. Y la situación es indigna de ti, de las dos. ¡Dos mujeres de cincuenta años, peleándose de esta manera! No es digno. Lo has hecho todo mal».

Y para ahogar aquella voz se esforzó todo lo que pudo para alentar el sentimiento de haber sufrido una injusticia.

«¡Dominarla!».

Y Constanza estaba totalmente equivocada. No había razonado en absoluto. ¡Simplemente se había aferrado tercamente a su idea! ¡Cuán difícil y penoso iba a ser el siguiente encuentro con Constanza, después de aquel grave extravío!

Mientras se hallaba sumida en estas reflexiones, la puerta se abrió de golpe y entró Constanza, tropezando como si estuviese ciega. Aún lloraba.

—¡Sofía! —sollozó, suplicante; todo su obeso cuerpo temblaba—, No me mates... Yo soy así: no puedes cambiarme. Soy así. Sé que soy tonta. ¡Pero es inútil! —Ofrecía un aspecto lamentable.

Sofía notó que tenía un nudo en la garganta.

—Está bien, Constanza; está bien. Lo entiendo perfectamente. No te preocupes más.

Constanza, a quien a intervalos se le cortaba la respiración, alzó el mojado y gastado rostro y la besó.

Sofía recordó que habían sido las mismas palabras —«no puedes cambiarla» —las que ella había utilizado al reconvenir a Cyril. ¡Y, ahora, ella había sido culpable de la misma sinrazón que había reprochado a Cyril! Estaba avergonzada por sí misma y por Constanza. Desde luego no era una escena que las mujeres de su edad querrían vivir con frecuencia. Era humillante. Hubiera deseado que se pudiera borrar, como si no hubiese sucedido. Ninguna de las dos la olvidaría jamás. Habían recibido una lección. Y sobre todo Sofía había recibido una lección. Habiéndola aprendido, dejaron el Rutland con las debidas ceremonias y regresaron a la Plaza de San Lucas.

Capitulo IV

FIN DE SOFÍA

I

Los peldaños de la cocina eran tan empinados, oscuros y difíciles como siempre. Por ellos subía Sofía Scales, nueve años mayor que cuando no consiguió convencer a Constanza para que abandonara la Plaza, llevando una gran cesta, cargada con todo el peso de F*ossette.* Sofía, a pesar de su edad, subió los peldaños violentamente e irrumpió con la misma violencia en la sala, donde depositó la cesta en el suelo, cerca de la chimenea vacía. Estaba triunfante y sin aliento. Miró a Constanza, que estaba en pie junto a la puerta en actitud de alguien que escuchara escandalizado.

—¡Ahí tienes! —exclamó Sofía—, ¿Has oído lo que ha dicho?

—Sí —dijo Constanza—¿Qué vas a hacer?

—Bien —repuso Sofía—, lo que me apeteció fue echarla de la casa ahora mismo. Pero luego pensé que no se daría por enterada. Se va dentro de tres semanas. Lo mejor es la indiferencia. Como vean una vez que te pueden alterar... Sin embargo, no iba a dejar a *Fossette* allá abajo a su merced ni un momento más. Lo que pasa es que no cuida de ella.

Sofía se arrodilló junto a la cesta y, apartando el pelo que cubría la cabeza del animal, examinó la piel. *Fossette* estaba enferma y se comportaba en consonancia. También *Fossette* tenía nueve años más y su senilidad era desagradable. Ya no era un objeto grato en ningún sentido.

—Mira —dijo Sofía.

Constanza se arrodilló también junto a la cesta.

—Y aquí —indicó Sofía—, Y aquí.

La perra dejó escapar un suspiro, el suspiro insincero y conmiserativo de un animal consentido. *Fossette,* neciamente, esperaba librarse con aquellas apelaciones del tratamiento prescrito por el veterinario.

Mientras las hermanas la mimaban, la protegían de sus propias garras y trataban de convencerla de que todo era por su bien, entró en la sala otro perro añoso: *Mancha.* Tenía muy pocos dientes y las patas rígidas. Sólo tenía un vicio, los celos. Temiendo que *Fossette* recibiera toda la atención de sus amas, había acudido a informarse de la situación. Cuando vio que sus más sombríos temores estaban justificados, husmeó a Constanza y no quiso ser postergado. En vano le dijo Constanza que estaba interfiriendo con el tratamiento. En vano le ordenó Sofía secamente que se marchara. No quiso atender a razones, enfurecido por los celos. Metió la pata en la cesta.

—¡Quita! —exclamó enfadada Sofía, dándole un capón en su vieja cabeza. Ladró, airado, y se retiró de nuevo a la cocina, desilusionado, cansado del mundo y lamiéndose la herida de su terrible agravio.

—De verdad creo —dijo Sofía— que ese perro está cada vez peor.

Constanza no dijo nada.

Cuando se hizo todo lo que se podía hacer por la vetusta doncella de la cesta, las hermanas se pusieron en pie, entumecidas, y empezaron a cuchichear sobre las posibilidades de conseguir una nueva criada. Discutieron también si podían tolerar tres semanas más las criminales excentricidades de la actual ocupante de la cueva. Evidentemente, estaban en medio de una crisis. A juzgar por la cara de Constanza, el destino había acumulado sobre sus cabezas todas las tribulaciones imaginables sin la menor consideración por su capacidad de resistencia. En los ojos de aquélla había una permanente mirada de preocupación y también una cierta expresión de autodefensa. Sofía tenía un aire belicoso, como si el ser de la cueva la hubiese desafiado francamente y estuviese decidida a aceptar el desafío. El tono de Sofía parecía insinuar una acusación contra Constanza. La tensión general era grande.

Después, de repente, los cuchicheos cesaron, la puerta se abrió y entró la criada a servir la cena. Llevaba la nariz levantada y su mirada era cruel, radiante y conquistadora. Era una linda y descarada muchacha de unos veintitrés años. Sabía que estaba torturando a sus viejas y débiles señoras. No le importaba. Lo hacía a propósito. Su lema era: "Haz la guerra a las patronas; sácales todo lo que puedas, pues ellas te sacarán a ti todo lo que puedan". Por principio —el único principio que tenía—, no se quedaba en una casa más de seis meses. Le gustaba cambiar. Y a las patronas no les gustaba cambiar. Con los hombres era desvergonzada. No hacía caso de las órdenes acerca de lo que tenía que comer y lo que no tenía que comer. Estaba a la altura de los mayores recursos de sus patronas. Podía ser una dejada hasta el grado más extremo. O podía ser tan limpia como los chorros del oro, con un delantal que era símbolo de pureza y decoro, como aquella tarde. Podía pasarse un día haciendo el vago, acumulando platos sucios de la mañana a la noche. Por otra parte, podía, cuando quería, trabajar con asombrosa celeridad e incluso con esmero. En suma, había nacido para enfurecer a un ama como Sofía y para agotar a un ama como Constanza. Su mayor ventaja en la lucha era que le encantaban los altercados, se deleitaba en la gresca, hallaba tediosa la paz. Estaba perfectamente calculada para convencer a las hermanas de que eran peores tiempos y de que el mundo nunca volvería a ser el lugar hermoso y agradable que antaño había sido.

Al poner la mesa, sus gestos eran graciosos, dentro de un estilo descocado. Tiraba con desdén los tenedores en el lugar señalado para ellos; hacía un ruido un tanto excesivo; cuando se daba la vuelta maniobraba con las caderas como si fuese en provecho de un soldado con un bonito uniforme.

En la casa no había cambiado nada más que la criada. El armonio que el señor Povey tocaba de vez en cuando seguía estando detrás de la puerta, y encima la caja de té cuya llave llevaba la señora Baines en su manojo. En la esquina de la derecha de la chimenea estaba todavía el aparador en el que la señora Baines guardaba su farmacopea. El resto de los muebles estaban en la misma distribución que tenían cuando la muerte de la señora Baines hizo que todos los tesoros de la casa de Axe pasaran al señor y a la señora Povey. Y estaban tan bien como siempre, mejor que nunca. El doctor Stirling expresaba a menudo el deseo de poseer un aparador de esquina como el de la señora Baines. Se había añadido una pieza: la compota[59] «Peel» que había llamado la atención de Peel-Swynnerton en la Pensión Frensham. Esta pieza majestuosa, que Sofía se había reservado en la venta de la pensión, figuraba sola sobre un revistero en el salón. La había guardado, junto con otras bagatelas, en París; cuando hizo que se la enviaran y llegó la caja, Constanza y ella se dieron cuenta de que estaban unidas para el resto de su vida. Por lo que atañe a bienes terrenales, aparte de dinero, valores y ropa, aquella compota era casi todo lo que Sofía poseía. Por suerte era una pieza de primera categoría, que no avergonzaba la magnificencia antigua del salón.

Al ceder a la terrible inercia de Constanza, Sofía se había propuesto no obstante hacer su voluntad en el interior de la casa. Se había propuesto acosar a Constanza hasta que accediera a modernizar la morada. Acosó en efecto a Constanza, pero la casa la desafió. No se podía hacer nada en aquella casa. Si por lo menos hubiese tenido vestíbulo o recibidor habría sido posible una transformación completa. Pero no había otro acceso a la planta alta sino a través de la sala. Por tanto, no se podía convertir la sala en cocina y eliminar el sótano, y las señoras de la casa no podían hacer la vida totalmente en la planta alta. La disposición de las habitaciones tenía que seguir siendo exactamente la misma de siempre. Había la misma corriente por debajo de la puerta, la misma oscuridad en la escalera de la cocina, las mismas dificultades con los comerciantes del lejano patio trasero, el mismo eterno subir y bajar cubos. Una cocina económica, en vez del amplio y capaz fogón, era la única representación del siglo XX en los adminículos de la casa.

En la raíz de la relación entre las hermanas estaba enterrado el viejo agravio de Sofía contra Constanza por negarse a abandonar la Plaza. Sofía era leal. Conscientemente no daría con una mano y quitaría con la otra; al aceptar la decisión de Constanza, lo hizo con la sincera intención de cerrar los ojos a su estupidez. Pero no lo consiguió plenamente. No podía evitar el pensar que la angelical Constanza había sido extraña y monstruosamente egoísta al negarse a dejar la Plaza. Se maravillaba de que una mujer de la dulce y tranquila disposición de Constanza fuera capaz de un egoísmo tan enorme e inflexible. Constanza tenía que saber que Sofía no la iba a abandonar y que residir en la Plaza era para ella un constante fastidio. Constanza nunca había podido presentar un solo argumento a favor de permanecer en la Plaza. Y, sin embargo, no quería moverse de allí. Esto era extremadamente incongruente con la conducta de Sofía en general. ¡Había que ver a Sofía, sentada muy formal a la mesa, una mujer de casi sesenta años, con una inmensa experiencia escrita en la fina dureza de su gastado y distinguido rostro! Aunque su cabello no estaba aún totalmente gris ni su figura encorvada, uno pensaría que, en su paso por el mundo, habría aprendido algo más que a esperar que el carácter de una persona fuera congruente. ¡Pues no! ¡La incongruencia de Constanza la seguía decepcionando y ofendiendo! ¡Y había que ver a Constanza, gruesa y encorvada, aparentando más edad de la que tenía, con el cabello casi blanco y sus manos algo temblonas! Había que ver aquel rostro, marcado por la docilidad, el espíritu de conciliación, el deseo de paz... Nadie pensaría que su alma plácida pudiera encolerizarse contra el impuesto peso de la personalidad de Sofía, al tiempo que se sometía a él. «Como no quiero irme de mi casa para complacerla —se decía Constanza—, se imagina que tiene derecho a hacer lo que le dé la gana». No se

rebelaba así con gran frecuencia, pero sí a veces. No llegaron a pelearse. Habrían considerado la separación como un desastre. Teniendo en cuenta lo diferentes que habían sido sus vidas, era sorprendente cómo coincidían en su manera de enjuiciar las cosas. Pero la soterrada cuestión de la residencia impedía que hubiese una completa unidad entre ellas. Y su efecto sutil fue influir en ambas para sacar lo peor, y no lo mejor, de los nimios percances que perturbaban su tranquilidad. Cuando estaba enojada, Sofía reflexionaba sobre el simple hecho de que vivían en la Plaza sin que hubiese ninguna razón para ello hasta que se le hacía increíblemente escandaloso. Al fin y al cabo, era difícil comprender por qué vivían en el mismo centro de una ciudad industrial fea y sucia simplemente porque Constanza, tercamente, se negaba a mudarse. Otra cosa que de vez en cuando exasperaba curiosamente a ambas era que, debido a la reaparición de sus antiguos mareos después de comer, se había prohibido estrictamente a Sofía tomar té, que le encantaba. A Sofía le irritaba aquella privación y Constanza gozaba menos de su placer porque tenía que tomarlo sola.

Mientras la bonita y descarada criada, sonriendo misteriosamente para sí, dejaba caer comestibles y utensilios sobre la mesa, Constanza y Sofía intentaron conversar despreocupadamente acerca de temas sin importancia, como si no hubiese ocurrido aquel día nada que estropease la belleza de las relaciones ideales entre patronas y criada. La simulación fue ridícula. La joven arpía la caló al instante y su misteriosa sonrisa se convirtió casi en carcajada.

—Por favor, cierra la puerta cuando salgas, Maud —dijo Sofía cuando la muchacha recogió la bandeja vacía.

—Sí, señora —respondió Maud cortésmente.

Salió y dejó la puerta abierta.

Era un desafío, llevado a cabo por pura travesura juvenil y desvergonzada.

Las hermanas se miraron, con expresión profundamente confusa, horrorizadas, como si hubieran vislumbrado el fin de la sociedad civilizada, como si pensaran que habían vivido demasiado tiempo en una era decadente y abiertamente vergonzosa. El rostro de Constanza mostraba desesperación —igual que si estuviera a punto de ser arrojada al arroyo sin un amigo y sin un chelín—, pero en el de Sofía se vio el valor que el desastre engendra.

Se levantó de un salto y se acercó a la puerta.

—¡Maud! —llamó.

No hubo respuesta.

—Maud, ¿me oye?

La incertidumbre era espantosa.

Tampoco hubo respuesta.

Sofía miró a Constanza.

—¡O cierra esta puerta o se marcha de esta casa ahora mismo, aunque tenga que ir a buscar a un policía! —le dijo. Y desapareció por la escalera de la cocina. Constanza temblaba de dolorosa excitación. El horror de la existencia se cernía sobre ella. No podía imaginar nada más atroz que el apuro en que la había puesto el cambio moderno de las clases inferiores.

En la cocina, Sofía, consciente de que de aquel momento dependía el futuro de las tres semanas siguientes, hizo acopio de fuerzas.

—Maud —dijo—, ¿no ha oído que la llamaba?

Maud levantó la vista del libro que estaba leyendo, sin duda un libro perverso.

—No, señora.

«¡Qué embustera!», pensó Sofía. Y dijo:

—Le pedí que cerrara la puerta de la sala y le quedaré agradecida si lo hace.

En aquel momento, Maud habría dado el salario de una semana por tener la fuerza moral de

desobedecer a Sofía. No había nada que la forzase a obedecer. Podría pisotear a la débil y frágil Sofía. Pero algo en la mirada de ésta la obligó a obedecer. Hizo aspavientos, torció el gesto, gruñó y molestó sin necesidad al venerable *Mancha,* pero obedeció. Sofía lo había arriesgado todo y había ganado algo.

—Y debería encender el gas en la cocina —dijo magnánimamente cuando Maud la siguió escalera arriba—. Tal vez su joven vista sea muy buena ahora, pero ésa no es manera de conservarla. Mi hermana y yo le hemos dicho muchas veces que no le escatimamos el gas.

Con aire señorial se reunió con Constanza y se sentó ante la cena fría. Y cuando Maud cerró la puerta las hermanas respiraron aliviadas. Preveían nuevas tribulaciones, pero por un breve instante quedaban apartadas.

Sin embargo, no pudieron comer. Ninguna de las dos fue capaz de tragar. El día había sido demasiado excitante, demasiado penoso. Estaban al cabo de sus recursos. La enfermedad de *Fossette,* por sí sola, habría sido más que suficiente para dar al traste con su sosiego, pero no era nada al lado de las ingeniosas travesuras de la sirvienta. Maud tenía la sensación de haber sido temporalmente derrotada y estaba planeando nuevas operaciones; pero en realidad era Maud quien había vencido. ¡Pobrecillas, estaban en un «estado» tal que no pudieron ni comer!

—¡No voy a dejar que crea que me ha quitado el apetito! —exclamó Sofía, intrépida. En verdad que el espíritu de aquella mujer era insaciable.

Cortó un par de tajadas del ave fría e hizo rodajas un tomate, revolvió la mantequilla, esparció migas de pan por el mantel, frotó trozos de ave en los platos y ensució cuchillos y tenedores. Después envolvió en un papel las tajadas del ave junto con pan y tomate; en silencio subió con el paquete y volvió a bajar un momento después con las manos vacías.

Tras un intervalo tocó la campanilla y encendió el gas.

—Hemos terminado, Maud. Puede recoger.

Constanza estaba deseando tomar una taza de té. Pensaba que una taza de té era lo único que podía realmente mantenerla viva. La anhelaba apasionadamente. Pero no quiso pedírsela a Maud. Ni siquiera quiso mencionárselo a Sofía, por temor a que ésta, exaltada por la victoria de la puerta, incurriera en nuevos riesgos. Se limitó a pasar sin ella. Con el estómago vacío, intentaron patéticamente ayudarse la una a la otra haciendo solitarios. Y cuando la risueña Maud pasó por la sala para ir a acostarse, vio a dos damas dignas y aparentemente tranquilas absortas en sus deleitosos juegos de cartas, al parecer sin una sola preocupación en el mundo. Dijeron: «Buenas noches, Maud», con jovialidad, cortesía y frialdad. Fue una escena heroica. Inmediatamente después, Sofía se llevó a *Fossette* a su habitación.

II

La tarde siguiente, las hermanas, que se hallaban en el salón, vieron el automóvil del doctor Stirling pasar a toda velocidad por la Plaza. El socio del médico, Harrop hijo, había muerto hacía unos años con más de setenta, y la consulta era mucho más grande que nunca, incluso que en la época de Harrop padre. En vez de dos o tres caballos, Stirling tenía un automóvil que era un permanente espectáculo en las calles de las ciudades de la región.

—Espero que nos haga una visita —dijo la señora Povey, suspirando.

Sofía sonrió con cierto desdén. Sabía que el deseo de Constanza de ver al doctor Stirling se debía simplemente a su necesidad de contar a alguien la gran calamidad que les había sucedido aquella mañana. Constanza estaba totalmente absorbida por ella, de la manera más provinciana. Sofía se había dicho, al comienzo de su estancia en Bursley y mucho después, que nunca se acostumbraría al exasperante provincianismo de la ciudad, ejemplificado en la pueril preocupación de sus habitantes por sus insignificantes asuntos. ,Ninguna característica de la vida en Bursley la irritaba más. Ninguna la había hecho anhelar, en un breve acceso de locura, la libertad de las grandes ciudades, semejante a la que se disfrutaría en un desierto. Pero se había acostumbrado. En realidad casi había dejado de percibirla. Sólo la acusaba de tiempo en tiempo, cuando sus nervios estaban más descompuestos de lo habitual.

Entró en la habitación de Constanza para ver si el coche del médico se detenía en King Street. En efecto, se detuvo allí.

—Aquí está —gritó a Constanza.

—Me gustaría que bajaras, Sofía —dijo Constanza—, No puedo fiarme de esa picara...

De modo que Sofía bajó a supervisar la apertura de la puerta por la picara.

El médico estaba radiante, como siempre.

—Se me ocurrió venir a ver qué tal iban esos mareos —dijo mientras subía la escalera.

—Me alegro de que haya venido —le dijo Sofía en tono confidencial. Desde que se conocían utilizaban un tono confidencial—. A mi hermana le hará bien verlo a usted hoy.

Justo cuando Maud estaba cerrando la puerta llegó un repartidor de telegramas con uno dirigido a la señora Scales. Sofía lo leyó y luego lo arrugó en la mano.

—¿Qué le pasa hoy a la señora Povey? —preguntó el médico cuando la criada se hubo retirado.

—Sólo quiere que le haga compañía un rato —respondió Sofía—. ¿Quiere subir? Ya conoce el camino al salón. Yo iré dentro de un momento.

En cuanto él se marchó, se sentó en el sofá, mirando por la ventana. Después se dijo, resoplando: «¡Bueno, de todas formas es inútil!», y subió tras el médico. Constanza había dado ya comienzo a su recital.

—Sí —estaba diciendo—. Y cuando bajé esta mañana a echar un vistazo al desayuno, me pareció que *Mancha* estaba muy silencioso... —hizo una pausa—. Estaba muerto en el cajón. Ella hizo como si no lo supiera, pero estoy segura de que lo mató. Nada me convencerá de que no envenenó a ese perro con el veneno para ratones que compramos el año pasado. Sería muy propio de ella. ¡No me lo diga! Ya lo sé. Debería haberla echado inmediatamente, pero Sofía pensó que era mejor no hacerlo. No podíamos probar nada, como dice Sofía. Y bien, ¿qué piensa usted, doctor?

Los ojos de Constanza se llenaron repentinamente de lágrimas.

—¿Hace mucho tiempo que tenía a *Mancha,* verdad? —preguntó él, en tono comprensivo.

Ella asintió con la cabeza.

—Cuando me casé —dijo —lo primero que hizo mi marido fue comprar un foxterrier, y desde entonces siempre tuvimos un foxterrier en casa. —Aquello no era cierto, pero Constanza estaba firmemente convencida de que lo era.

—Se pasa muy mal —dijo el médico— Cuando murió mi airedale, le dije a mi mujer que jamás tendría otro perro, a menos que ella pudiera encontrarme uno que viviera eternamente. ¿Se acuerda usted de mi airedale?

—¡Oh, perfectamente!

—Bueno, pues mi mujer dijo que era seguro que acabaría teniendo otro más tarde o más temprano, y que cuanto antes mejor. Se fue derecha a Oldcastle y me compró un cachorro de spaniel; dio tanto trabajo adiestrarlo que no tuvimos mucho tiempo para pensar en *Gaitero.*

A Constanza este procedimiento le pareció un poco insensible y así lo dijo con acritud. Luego volvió a relatar la muerte de *Mancha* desde el principio y llegó hasta el entierro, efectuado a primera hora de aquella tarde, en el patio, por el ayudante del señor Critchlow. Había sido preciso quitar algunas losas y volverlas a colocar.

—Desde luego —intervino el señor Stirling—, diez años son mucho tiempo. Era un perro viejo. Bueno, todavía tienen a la célebre *Fossette.* —Se volvió a Sofía.

—Oh, sí —dijo Constanza como por cumplir—, Fossette está enferma. El hecho es que, si *Fossette* no hubiera estado enferma, tal vez *Mancha* estuviese ahora vivo.

En su tono había una nota de agravio. No podía olvidar que Sofía, con aspereza, había expulsado a

Mancha a la cocina, enviándolo en la práctica a la muerte. Le parecía muy duro que *Fossette,* cuya vida en cierta ocasión se había perdido la esperanza de salvar, continuara existiendo, mientras que *Mancha,* siempre sano, había muerto desatendido y a traición. Por lo demás, a ella nunca le había gustado *Fossette.* Poniéndose de parte de *Mancha,* siempre había tenido celos de *Fossette.*

—¡Tal vez estuviese ahora vivo! —repitió, con un acento peculiar.

Observando que Sofía guardaba un extraño silencio, el doctor Stirling sospechó una ligera tensión en las relaciones de las hermanas y cambió de tema. Una de sus grandes cualidades era que se abstenía de cambiar un tema iniciado por uno de sus pacientes a menos que hubiese una razón profesional para ello.

—Acabo de encontrarme con Richard Povey en la ciudad —dijo—. Me pidió que las avisara de que se pasará por aquí dentro de media hora o así para llevarlas a dar una vuelta. Llevaba un coche nuevo e hizo cuanto pudo para vendérmelo, pero no lo consiguió.

—Es muy amable por parte de Dick —repuso Constanza—, Pero la verdad es que esta tarde no...

—Le agradeceré que lo tome como una receta, pues —replicó el médico—. Le dije a Dick que me ocuparía de que fueran. Hace un espléndido tiempo de junio. No hay polvo después de tanta lluvia. Les vendrá mejor que nada en el mundo. Tengo que ejercer mi autoridad. La verdad es que he ido perdiendo poco a poco toda la autoridad que tenía sobre ustedes. Hacen lo que les parece.

—¡Oh, doctor, qué cosas dice! —murmuró Constanza, no muy complacida aquel día con su tono.

Después de la escena que había tenido lugar entre ella y Sofía en Buxton, Constanza siempre se ensañaba un poco con él, según decía el propio médico. Sofía, pues, le había traicionado en cierto modo. Constanza y el médico hablaron del asunto con franqueza; él la acusó humorísticamente de ser «dura» con él. No obstante, la nubecilla que había entre ellos era real y las circunstancias se cifraban a menudo en un afán de crítica por parte de Constanza al juzgar la conducta del galeno.

—¡Dick tiene una sorpresa para ustedes! —añadió éste.

Dick Povey, tras la muerte de su padre y su parcial recuperación, se había instalado en Hanbridge como representante de bicicletas. Se quedó cojo de manera permanente y andaba a saltitos con un grueso bastón. Tuvo éxito con las bicicletas y lo estaba teniendo con los automóviles. La gente se sorprendió al principio de que se anunciara en las Cinco Ciudades. El vago sentimiento general era que, porque su madre había sido una borracha y su padre un asesino, Dick Povey no tenía derecho a existir. Sin embargo, cuando se recuperó de la conmoción de ver en la *Señal* el anuncio de gangas de Dick Povey, la región decidió, con más sensatez, que no había razón alguna para que Dick Povey no vendiera bicicletas como un hombre con unos progenitores normales. A la sazón se suponía que se estaba haciendo rico con gran celeridad. Se decía que era un conductor maravilloso, a un tiempo osado y prudente. Cierto día, varios años antes, había adelantado a las hermanas en el barrio rural de Sneyd, donde habían ido a hacer una excursión vespertina. Constanza le había presentado a Sofía y él había insistido en llevar a las señoras a casa. Les habían impresionado mucho sus atenciones con ellas; el natural prejuicio que abrigaban contra una cosa tan nueva como un automóvil había quedado superado al instante. Con posterioridad a aquello, las llevaba de paseo de vez en cuando. Sentía por Constanza una gran admiración, fundada en su gratitud a Samuel Povey; en cuanto a Sofía, siempre le decía que era un ornamento para cualquier automóvil.

—¿No se han enterado de su última ocurrencia, verdad? —inquirió el médico, sonriendo.

—¿Qué? —dijo Sofía mecánicamente.

—Quiere subir en globo. Al parecer ya lo ha hecho una vez.

Constanza dejó escapar un sonido desaprobador.

—Sin embargo, no es ésa su sorpresa —continuó el médico, sonriendo de nuevo con la vista clavada en el suelo. Estaba sentado en el taburete del armonio y se decía, detrás de su máscara de refulgente afabilidad: «Cada vez cuesta más animar a estas dos mujeres. Probaré con la Federación».

La Federación era el nombre que se daba al plan de fusionar las Cinco Ciudades en una sola ciudad, que sería la duodécima ciudad más grande del país. Suscitó furia en Bursley, que no veía en la sugerencia otra cosa que la extinción de su antigua gloria en aras del engrandecimiento de Hanbridge. Hanbridge, con la ayuda de los coches eléctricos que pasaban como balas cada cinco minutos, ya había despojado a Bursley de dos tercios de su comercio minorista —como atestiguaba la constante decadencia de la Plaza—, y Bursley no

tenía ningún deseo de tragarse el insulto y convertirse en un simple pupilo de Hanbridge. Bursley moriría luchando. Constanza y Sofía eran enemigas acérrimas de la Federación. Habrían sido capaces de someter a tortura a los federacionistas. Sobre todo Sofía, aunque ausente de su ciudad natal durante tanto tiempo, había adoptado su causa con la energía que la caracterizaba. Y cuando el doctor Stirling quería practicar su tratamiento curativo consistente en «sacar de sí mismas» a las hermanas, no tenía más que soltar la liebre de la Federación y la caza comenzaba de inmediato. Pero aquella tarde no tuvo éxito con Sofía, y sólo de manera parcial con Constanza. Cuando afirmó que iba a haber una reunión pública aquella misma noche y que Constanza, como contribuyente, debía asistir a ella y votar, si sus convicciones eran genuinas, recibió sus chanzas con un simple murmullo que daba a entender que no se consideraba obligada a ir. ¿Es que no se acordaba de que *Mancha* había muerto? Al cabo se puso serio y las interrogó a las dos acerca de sus achaques; asintió con la cabeza y adoptó una expresión ausente mientras meditaba sobre cada uno de los casos. Y luego, tras preguntarles dónde pensaban pasar las vacaciones de verano, se marchó.

—¿No vas a acompañarlo? —susurró Constanza a Sofía, que le había estrechado la mano en la puerta del salón. Era Sofía la que se movía por la casa, debido al estado del nervio ciático de Constanza. Lo cierto era que Constanza se había vuelto extremadamente inerte y lo dejaba todo en manos de Sofía.

—¡Mira esto! —dijo.

Su rostro asustó a Constanza, que estaba siempre esperando nuevos problemas y preocupaciones. Alisó el papel con dificultad y leyó:

«El señor Gerald Scales está aquí gravemente enfermo. Boldero, Deansgate, 49, Manchester».

Todo el tiempo que duró la visita del doctor Stirling, indeciblemente tediosa y totalmente innecesaria —¿por qué había tenido que ir precisamente entonces? Ninguna de las dos estaba enferma—, Sofía había conservado aquel telegrama escondido en la mano y aquella información escondida en el corazón. Había mantenido la cabeza alta, presentando al mundo una frente serena. No había dado indicio alguno de la terrible explosión, pues una explosión era. Constanza se asombró del dominio de sí misma que tenía su hermana, el cual superaba del todo su comprensión. Pensó que las inquietudes nunca iban a acabar; antes bien, se seguirían multiplicando hasta que la muerte terminara con todo. Primero había sido la horrible preocupación de la criada; luego la muerte y el entierro de *Mancha,* tan penosos, ¡y ahora Gerald Scales, que volvía a aparecer! ¡Con qué violencia cambiaban ahora de dirección los pensamientos de las dos mujeres! La perversidad de las doncellas era una insignificancia; la muerte de los animales domésticos era una insignificancia. ¡Pero la reaparición de Gerald Scales!... Aquello tendría tal vez unas consecuencias que no se podían ni mencionar, tan angustiosa era la simple posibilidad de que se produjeran. Constanza se quedó sin habla y vio que Sofía también estaba sin habla.

Estaba claro que aquello tenía que suceder. Las personas no se desvanecen sin que se vuelva a saber jamás de ellas. No hay duda de que llega un momento en el que se revela el secreto. Y Sofía se dijo que ese momento había llegado.

Siempre se había negado a pensar en una posible reaparición de Gerald. Había expulsado de sí aquella idea, decidida a convencerse de que había terminado con él definitivamente y para siempre. Lo había olvidado. Hacia años que había dejado de inquietar sus pensamientos, muchos años. «Seguro que ha muerto», se había persuadido. «Es inconcebible que esté vivo y no se haya cruzado en mi camino. Si estuviera vivo y se hubiese enterado de que he hecho dinero, no hay duda de que hubiera venido a verme. ¡No; seguro que ha muerto!».

¡Y no había muerto! El breve telegrama le produjo una conmoción abrumadora. Su vida había sido sosegada, regular, monótona.

Y ahora la veía sumida en una confusión indescriptible por obra de cinco palabras contenidas en un telegrama, repentinamente, sin aviso alguno. Sofía tenía derecho a decirse: «¡Yo ya he tenido suficientes tribulaciones, y más que suficientes!». El final de su vida prometía ser tan terrible como el principio. La mera existencia de Gerald Scales era una amenaza para ella. Pero fue el simple impacto del golpe lo que la afectó de aquella extraordinaria manera, más que lo que pudiera suceder después. Hubiera sido posible imaginar al destino como una bestia cobarde que descargase en pleno rostro a aquella mujer envejecida un golpe de gracia que, sin embargo, no la hubiera derribado. Titubeó pero resistió en pie. Parecía bochornoso —una de esas cosas bochornosas, groseras y espectaculares, que hacen que hierva la sangre— que aquel ser valeroso e

indefenso fuese de tal modo maltratado por aquel matón, el destino.

—¡Oh, Sofía! ¿Qué va a pasar ahora?

Los labios de Sofía se curvaron con un gesto de indignación bajo el cual ocultaba su sufrimiento. No lo había visto en treinta y seis años. Ahora tendría más de setenta y había vuelto como la falsa moneda; era desde luego una desgracia. ¿Qué habría estado haciendo durante aquellos treinta y seis años? ¡Ahora era un hombre viejo y debilitado! ¡Vaya una facha que tendría! ¡Y estaba en Manchester, a menos de dos horas!

Sean cuales fueren los sentimientos que abrigara el corazón de Sofía, la ternura no se contaba entre ellos. Mientras se recuperaba del golpe, era consciente sobre todo de un sentimiento de temor. Retrocedía ante el futuro.

—¿Qué vas a hacer? —inquirió Constanza, llorando.

Sofía daba golpecitos con el pie en el suelo, mirando por la ventana.

—¿Vas a ir a verlo? —prosiguió Constanza.

—¡Por supuesto! —respondió Sofía—. ¡Tengo que ir!

Aborrecía la idea de ir a verlo. Se resistía a ella. No pensaba que tuviera obligación moral alguna de ir. ¿Por qué tenía que ir? Gerald no era nada para ella ni tenía derechos de ninguna clase sobre ella. Esto era lo que sinceramente creía. Y, sin embargo, sabía que tenía que acudir a su lado. Sabía que era imposible no ir.

—¿Ahora? —preguntó Constanza.

Sofía hizo un gesto afirmativo.

—¿Y los trenes?... ¡Oh, pobrecita mía! —La simple idea de un viaje a Manchester espantaba a Constanza; se le antojaba una empresa de una complejidad y dificultad sin parangón.

—¿Quieres que vaya contigo?

—¡Oh, no! Debo ir sola.

Constanza se sintió aliviada. No podían dejar a la criada sola en la casa, y la idea de cerrar ésta sin aviso ni preparación le resultaba demasiado fantástica.

Por un común instinto, las dos se encaminaron a la sala.

—Bien..., hará falta un horario de trenes, ¿no? —balbuceó Constanza en la escalera. Se secó los ojos con resolución—. Me pregunto qué es lo que ha podido acabar llevándolo a casa de ese señor Boldero en Deansgate —preguntó a las paredes.

En el momento en que llegaban a la sala se detenía ante la puerta un gran automóvil; cuando se extinguieron las palpitaciones del motor, Dick Povey bajó renqueando del asiento del conductor a la acera. En un instante estaba aporreando la puerta a su manera vivaz. No había manera de librarse de él. Había que abrir la puerta. La abrió Sofía. Dick Povey tenía más de cuarenta años, pero aparentaba bastantes menos. A pesar de su cojera y del hecho de que ésta tendía a ser causa de corpulencia, tenía un aspecto gallardo y su rostro, adornado con un bigote corto y poco espeso, era el de un muchacho. Parecía estar siempre a punto de embarcarse en alguna divertida aventura.

—Bueno, tiítas —saludó a las hermanas, al ver a Constanza detrás de Sofía; muchas veces se dirigía a ellas de esta forma—. ¿Os ha avisado el doctor Stirling de que iba a venir? ¿Por qué no estáis preparadas?

Sofía vio que en el coche había una joven.

—Sí —dijo él, siguiendo su mirada—; podéis mirar. Baje, señorita. Baja, Lily. No hay más remedio. —La joven, delicadamente confusa y ruborizándose, obedeció—. Es la señorita Lily Holl —continuó él. No sé si la recordaréis. No creo. No viene mucho a la Plaza. Pero desde luego os conoce de vista. ¡Es la nieta de vuestro vecino Alderman Holl! Estamos prometidos en matrimonio, ¿qué os parece?

Constanza y Sofía no podían desahogar decorosamente su consternación habiendo aquellas noticias. Los novios tenían que entrar y recibir las felicitaciones por su ingreso en el extenso mundo del amor mutuo. Pero las hermanas, incluso en su penoso dilema, no pudieron dejar de reparar en lo agradable, sosegada y fina

que era Lily Holl. Su único defecto parecía ser que era demasiado callada. Dick Povey no era hombre que perdiera el tiempo en formalidades y pronto las apremió a partir.

—Por desgracia, no podemos ir —dijo Sofía—, Tengo que irme a Manchester ahora mismo. Tenemos un grave problema.

—Sí, un grave problema —repitió débilmente Constanza.

El rostro de Dick se nubló, en solidaridad con ellas. Y los novios empezaron a darse cuenta de lo que el egoísmo de su felicidad no les había dejado ver. Pensaron que habían pasado muchos, muchos años desde que aquellas envejecidas damas habían experimentado los deleites que ellos sentían.

—¿Problemas? ¡Cuánto lo siento! —exclamó Dick.

—¿Puedes decirme qué horario tienen los trenes a Manchester? —inquirió Sofía.

—No —repuso Dick con prontitud—. Pero puedo llevarte más deprisa que ningún tren, si es urgente. ¿Dónde quieres ir?

—A Deansgate —dijo Sofía con voz entrecortada.

—Escucha —dijo Dick—; son las tres y media. Ponte en mis manos; te garantizo que estarás en Deansgate antes de las cinco y media. Yo cuidaré de ti.

—Pero...

—No hay pero que valga. Tengo toda la tarde libre.

Al principio la sugerencia les pareció absurda, sobre todo a Constanza. Pero ciertamente era demasiado tentadora como para rechazarla. Mientras Sofía se preparaba para el viaje, Dick, Lily Holl y Constanza conversaban en voz baja y solemne. La pareja esperaba una explicación acerca de la naturaleza del problema; sin embargo, Constanza no se la dio. ¿Cómo les iba a decir «Sofía tiene un marido al que no ha visto desde hace treinta y seis años; está gravemente enfermo y le han telegrafiado para que vaya»? Constanza no podía hacerlo. Ni siquiera se le ocurrió mandar que les trajesen una taza de té.

III

Dick Povey cumplió su palabra. A las cinco y cuarto se detuvo ante el número 49 de Deansgate, en Martchester.

—¡Ahí lo tienes! —exclamó, no sin orgullo—. Bien; nosotros volveremos dentro de un par de horas o así para que nos des tus órdenes, sean las que fueren. —Era muy reconfortante para Sofía el poder contar con su apoyo seguro.

Sin decir mucho más, Sofía entró directamente en la tienda. Al parecer, era una joyería y se dedicaba a gangas en general. Sólo el rótulo convencional que se veía sobre una entrada lateral revelaba que era el establecimiento de un prestamista. El señor Till Boldero hacía buenos negocios en las Cinco Ciudades y en otros centros próximos a Manchester vendiendo objetos de plata, de segunda mano o nominalmente como tales, a personas que deseaban hacer regalos a otras personas o a sí mismas. Enviaba cualquier cosa por correo a prueba. De vez en cuando iba a las Cinco Ciudades y en cierta ocasión, varios años antes, conoció a Constanza. Hablaron. Era hijo de un primo del gran Boldero, muy rico y ya difunto, socio capitalista de los Birkinshaw y tío de Gerald. Fue a través de Constanza como supo del regreso de Sofía a Bursley. Constanza había hecho notar a Sofía muchas veces qué hombre superior era el señor Till Boldero.

La tienda era estrecha y de techos altos. Parecía un zoológico de objetos de plata capturados. En las vitrinas de cristal, que llegaban hasta el oscuro techo, se hallaban confinadas vasijas e instrumentos de plata de toda especie. La parte superior del mostrador era una cárcel de cristal que contenía docenas de relojes de oro junto con cajas de rapé, esmaltes y otras antigüedades. La parte delantera del mostrador estaba también acristalada, dejando ver jarrones y grandes cacharros de porcelana. Aquí y allá colgaban algunos cuadros con pesados marcos dorados. Había una vitrina de paraguas de elaborados puños y ricas borlas. Había un par de

estatuillas. El mostrador, por el lado de los clientes, acababa en una mampara de vidrio en la que se leían las palabras «Oficina privada». Por el lado del vendedor obstruía la perspectiva una amplia caja fuerte. Un joven alto buscaba a tientas en aquella caja. Había dos mujeres sentadas en las sillas dispuestas para los clientes; se apoyaban en el mostrador de cristal. El joven fue hacia ellas llevando una bandeja.

—¿Cuánto cuesta esta jarra? —preguntó una de las mujeres, levantando peligrosamente su sombrilla en medio de toda aquella fragilidad y señalando un objeto que se encontraba entre muchos otros en una vitrina alta.

—¿Ésa, señora?

—Sí.

—Treinta y cinco libras.

El joven colocó su bandeja sobre el mostrador. Estaba repleta de más relojes de oro, que aumentaban el extraordinario brillo y centelleo de la tienda. Escogió un pequeño reloj de aquel batallón.

—Bien; puedo recomendarle éste —dijo—. Está hecho por Cuthbert Buder, de Birmingham. Puedo garantizárselo por cinco años. —Hablaba como si fuese el representante acreditado del Banco de Inglaterra, con una tranquila y absoluta seguridad.

Aquello tuvo el misterioso efecto de sosegar a Sofía. Pensó que estaba entre hombres honrados. El joven levantó la cabeza hacia ella en un deferente gesto de interrogación.

—¿Puedo ver al señor Boldero? —preguntó—. Soy la señora Scales.

El rostro del joven mostró de inmediato una expresión comprensiva.

—Sí, señora. Voy a buscarlo ahora mismo —dijo, y desapareció detrás de la caja fuerte. Las dos clientas siguieron examinando el reloj. Después se abrió la puerta de la mampara de cristal y apareció un hombre corpulento, de mediana edad. Vestía de paño azul; llevaba cuello vuelto y una pequeña corbata negra. Su chaleco dejaba ver una cadena de reloj sencilla pero gruesa, y sus gemelos eran de oro liso. Llevaba gafas con montura de oro. Tenía el cabello, la barba y el bigote grises, pero en el dorso de sus manos crecía un ligero vello marrón. Su apariencia era extrañamente afable y digna e inspiraba confianza. Lo cierto es que era uno de los comerciantes más respetados de Manchester.

Dirigió ante sí una mirada escrutadora por encima de los anteojos, que luego se quitó, sosteniéndolos en el aire por el corto mango. Sofía se aproximó a él.

—¿Señora Scales? —dijo él en voz muy baja y benévola. Sofía hizo un gesto de asentimiento—. Por favor, venga por aquí. —Tomó su mano, oprimiéndola con sentido ademán, y la condujo al sanctasanctórum —. No la esperaba tan pronto —prosiguió—. Miré los trenes y pensé que no podría llegar antes de las seis.

Sofía se lo explicó.

Él continuó más allá, atravesando la oficina privada hasta entrar en una especie de salón, y le rogó que tomase asiento. Y también se sentó. Sofía aguardó, por así decirlo, como si fuese un pretendiente.

—Me temo que tengo malas noticias para usted, señora Scales —dijo, siempre con su voz afable y benévola.

—¿Ha muerto?—preguntó Sofía.

El señor Boldero asintió con la cabeza.

—Ha muerto. Puedo decirle que falleció antes de que yo la telegrafiase. Todo sucedió muy repentinamente. —Se detuvo—. ¡Muy, muy repentinamente!

—Sí —respondió Sofía, débilmente. Era consciente de una profunda tristeza que no era pesar, aunque se asemejaba al pesar. Y sentía también que era responsable ante el señor Till Boldero de cualquier adversidad que pudiera haberle ocurrido por causa de Gerald.

—Sí —prosiguió el señor Boldero despaciosa y suavemente—. Vino anoche, justo cuando estábamos cerrando. Llovía mucho. No sé si donde usted vive también. Estaba mojado, en un estado espantoso, sencillamente espantoso. Desde luego, no lo reconocí. No lo había visto antes, hasta donde puedo recordar. Me

preguntó si era hijo del señor Till Boldero que tenía esta tienda en 1866. Dije que sí. «Bien —dijo—; es usted el único pariente que tengo. Mi nombre es Gerald Scales. Mi madre era prima del padre de usted. ¿Puede usted hacer algo por mí?». Me di cuenta de que estaba enfermo. Lo alojé aquí. Cuando vi que no podía comer ni beber pensé que era mejor llamar al médico. El médico le ordenó que se acostara. Falleció a la una de esta tarde. Sentí mucho que no estuviera mi mujer para ocuparse de todo un poco mejor. Pero está en Southport; no se encuentra nada bien.

—¿Qué fue? —inquirió sucintamente Sofía.

El señor Boldero entendió la enigmática pregunta.

—Agotamiento, me figuro —respondió.

—¿Está aquí? —preguntó Sofía, levantando la vista en dirección a las posibles habitaciones.

—Sí —repuso el señor Boldero—, Me imagino que querrá verlo.

—Sí —dijo Sofía.

—Su hermana me dijo que hacía mucho que no lo había visto —murmuró el señor Boldero en tono compasivo.

—Desde el año setenta —contestó Sofía.

—¡Oh, Dios mío, Dios mío! —exclamó el señor Boldero— Me temo que todo esto ha sido muy triste para usted, señora Scales. ¡Desde el año setenta! —suspiró—. Debe sobrellevarlo lo mejor que pueda. No soy hombre de muchas palabras, pero tiene usted toda mi comprensión. ¡Ya lo creo que la tiene! Ojalá hubiera estado aquí mi mujer para recibirla.

Asomaron lágrimas a los ojos de Sofía.

—¡No, no! —dijo él—, ¡Ahora tiene que ser valiente!

—Es usted quien me hace llorar —dijo Sofía, con gratitud—. Fue usted muy bueno por alojarlo. Debe de haber sido muy duro para usted.

—¡Oh! —protestó él— No debe hablar así. ¡Yo no podría dejar a un Boldero en la calle, y además a un anciano...! ¡Oh, y pensar que si hubiera conseguido complacer a su tío podría haber sido uno de los hombres más ricos de Lancashire...! ¡Pero entonces no habría un Instituto Boldero en Strangeways! —añadió.

Ambos permanecieron en silencio un momento.

—¿Quiere ir ahora? ¿O prefiere esperar un poco? —le preguntó amablemente el señor Boldero—, Como quiera. ¡Cuánto lamento que no esté mi esposa!

—Iré ahora —dijo Sofía con firmeza. Pero se sentía abrumada.

Él la condujo por un tramo de escalera corto y oscuro que daba a un pasillo; al final de éste había una puerta entreabierta. El señor Boldero la abrió del todo.

—La dejaré un momento —dijo, siempre en el mismo tono contenido—. Me encontrará abajo, si me necesita. —Y se fue andando despacio y sin ruido.

Sofía entró en la habitación, cuya blanca persiana estaba echada. Apreció la consideración que había tenido el señor Boldero al dejarla sola. Estaba temblando. Pero cuando vio, en la pálida semipenumbra, el rostro de un anciano asomando de una sábana blanca, sobre un colchón desnudo, retrocedió, sin temblar ya más, antes bien paralizada por una absoluta rigidez. La que experimentó no fue una conmoción convencional, esperada. Fue una conmoción auténticamente imprevista, la más violenta que había sufrido jamás. En su fuero interno no se había imaginado a Gerald como un hombre muy viejo. Sabía que era viejo; se había dicho que debía de ser muy viejo, que tendría más de setenta años. Pero no se lo había imaginado. El rostro que había sobre el lecho suscitaba lástima y compasión por su vejez. ¡Un rostro marchito, con la lustrosa piel llena de arrugas! La estirada piel de debajo del mentón era como la de una gallina desplumada. Los pómulos se elevaban, y debajo de ellos había unos huecos profundos, casi como hueveras. Una barba blanca, corta y rala, cubría la parte inferior del rostro. El cabello era escaso, irregular y totalmente blanco; de las orejas salía un poco de pelo blanco. La cerrada boca ocultaba evidentemente unas encías desdentadas, pues los labios estaban retraídos. Los párpados parecían estar pegados sobre los ojos; se ajustaban a ellos como la cabritilla. Toda la

piel estaba extremadamente pálida; tenía aspecto quebradizo. El cuerpo, cuyos perfiles se veían claramente bajo la sábana, era muy pequeño, delgado; daba pena, como la cara. Y en ésta había una expresión general de fatiga última, de trágico y agudo agotamiento, que hizo que Sofía se alegrara de que el reposo hubiera aliviado aquella fatiga y agotamiento, al tiempo que no dejaba de pensar con horror: «¡Oh! ¡Qué cansado debía de estar!».

Sofía experimentó después una emoción puramente primitiva, no teñida de ningún matiz moral ni religioso. No sintió que Gerald hubiese malgastado su vida, ni que hubiese sido una vergüenza para sí mismo y para ella. Cómo había vivido era algo que no tenía importancia. Lo que le afectó fue que había sido joven y que había envejecido y ahora estaba muerto. La juventud y el vigor habían venido a parar en aquello. La juventud y el vigor siempre venían a parar en aquello. La había tratado mal; la había abandonado; había sido un taimado granuja, pero ¡cuán triviales parecían aquellas acusaciones! Todos sus enormes y amargos agravios contra él se hicieron pedazos y se desmoronaron. Lo vio joven, orgulloso y fuerte, como cuando la había besado tendida en la cama en aquel hotel de Londres —había olvidado su nombre— en 1866; y ahora era viejo, estaba acabado, horrible y muerto. Era el enigma de la vida lo que la desconcertaba y la estaba matando. Por el rabillo del ojo vislumbró, reflejada en el espejo de un armario que había junto a la cama, a una mujer alta y desamparada, que antaño fuera joven y ahora era vieja; que antaño se había regocijado en su sobrada energía y había desafiado orgullosamente a las circunstancias y ahora era vieja. Él y ella se habían amado antaño; habían ardido y se habían peleado con la rutilante y desdeñosa arrogancia de la juventud. Pero el tiempo había acabado con ellos. «¡Un poco de tiempo más —pensó— y yo también yaceré así sobre una cama! Y ¿para qué he vivido? ¿Qué sentido tiene?». El enigma de la misma vida la mataba; sentía como si se estuviese ahogando en un mar de indecible tristeza.

Su memoria vagó con desesperanza por aquellos años pasados. Vio a Chirac con su sonrisa nostálgica. Lo vio arrastrado por el viento sobre el tejado de la Estación del Norte, en el extremo de un globo. Vio al viejo Niepce. Sintió su brazo lascivo en tomo a ella. Ahora era tan vieja como era entonces Niepce. ¿Podía despertar lascivia ahora? ¡Ah! ¡Qué pregunta tan irónica! Ser joven y seductora; poder atraer las miradas de un hombre: aquello le parecía lo único deseable. ¡Antaño había sido así!... Niepce, sin duda, habría muerto hacía años. ¡Niepce, el testarudo y optimista vividor, ya no era más que un montón de huesos en un ataúd!

En aquellos momentos supo lo que era la aflicción. Todo lo que había sufrido con anterioridad quedó reducido a la insignificancia al lado de aquel sufrimiento.

Se volvió hacia la velada ventana, levantó la persiana y miró al exterior. Enormes automóviles rojos y amarillos pasaban con estruendo por Deansgate; traqueteaban camiones ruidosamente; las gentes de Manchester caminaban a toda prisa por las aceras, aparentemente inconscientes de que cuanto hacían era inútil. ¡El día anterior también él había estado en Deansgate, sediento de vida, aborreciendo la idea de la muerte! ¡Qué aspecto debía de tener! Su corazón se deshizo en piedad por él. Dejó caer la persiana.

«¡Mi vida ha sido demasiado terrible! —pensó—. Ojalá estuviera muerta. He sufrido demasiado. Es monstruoso y no puedo soportarlo. No quiero morir, pero me gustaría estar muerta».

Llamaron discretamente a la puerta.

—Adelante —dijo en tono tranquilo, resignado y animoso. El sonido la había hecho despertar, con la celeridad de un milagro, a la indomable dignidad del orgullo humano.

Entró el señor Boldero.

—Me gustaría que bajara a tomar una taza de té —dijo. Era una maravilla de tacto y buen natural—. Por desgracia, mi esposa no está y la casa está un poco manga por hombro, pero he mandado que traigan té.

Ella lo siguió por la escalera hasta el salón. Él le sirvió té.

—Se me había olvidado —dijo Sofía— Tengo prohibido el té. No debo tomarlo.

Miró la taza, enormemente tentada. Ansiaba tomar té. Una transgresión ocasional no podía hacerle daño. Pero ¡no! No lo tomaría.

—Entonces ¿qué puedo traerle?

—Si pudiera tomar sólo leche y agua... —respondió ella tímidamente.

El señor Boldero vació la taza en el recipiente de los posos y empezó a llenarla de nuevo.

—¿Le dijo algo? —preguntó Sofía, después de un considerable silencio.

—Nada —contestó el señor Boldero con su voz baja y tranquilizadora—, Nada excepto que venía de Londres. A juzgar por su calzado, yo diría que había hecho buena parte del camino a pie.

—¡A su edad! —murmuró Sofía, conmovida.

—Sí —suspiró el señor Boldero—. Ha debido de verse en grandes apuros. ¿Sabe? Casi no podía ni hablar. Por cierto, aquí está su ropa. La he guardado.

Sofía vio un montoncito de ropa sobre una silla. Examinó el traje, que todavía estaba mojado, y su aspecto raído y deplorable le causó dolor. El cuello de la camisa estaba casi negro, con el gemelo de pechera de hueso. En cuanto a las botas, las había visto similares en los pies de los vagabundos. Entonces se echó a llorar. Aquélla era la ropa de un hombre que otrora había sido un dandy y se gastaba cincuenta libras a la semana.

—No llevaba equipaje o algo, me imagino —murmuró.

—No —repuso el señor Boldero— En los bolsillos no llevaba más que esto.

Se acercó a la chimenea y cogió un estuche para cartas barato y agrietado, que Sofía abrió. En él había una tarjeta de visita —«Señorita Clemencia Borja»—y una factura del hotel Espíritu Santo, Concepción del Uruguay, en cuyo dorso había multitud de números garabateados.

—Se podría deducir —dijo el señor Boldero— que venía de América del Sur.

—¿Nada más?

—Nada.

El alma de Gerald no se había visto forzada a abandonar gran cosa en las prisas de su huida.

Una criada anunció que los amigos de la señora Scales la esperaban fuera, en el automóvil. Sofía miró al señor Boldero con expresión de exacerbada ansiedad.

—¡No esperarán que vuelva con ellos esta noche! —exclamó—¡Mire todo lo que hay que hacer!

La amabilidad del señor Boldero se redobló entonces.

—Ya no puede hacer nada por él —dijo—. Dígame cuáles son sus deseos por lo que se refiere al funeral. Yo me ocuparé de todo. Vuelva junto a su hermana esta noche. Estará preocupada por usted. Y venga mañana o pasado... ¡No! ¡No hay ningún problema, se lo aseguro!

Sofía cedió.

Así, hacia las ocho, después de comer alguna cosa bajo la supervisión del señor Boldero y ya cerrado el establecimiento de préstamos, el automóvil partió de nuevo para Bursley, con Lily Holl sentada junto a su novio y Sofía sola en el asiento de atrás. No les había dicho nada de la naturaleza de su misión. Vieron que se hallaba en un estado de grave perturbación mental. Al amparo del ruido del coche, Lily dijo a Dick que tenía la seguridad de que la señora Scales estaba enferma; Dick apretó los labios y replicó que pretendía estar en King Street todo lo más a las nueve y media. De vez en cuando Lily miraba disimuladamente a Sofía —una mirada de aprensiva inspección— o le sonreía en silencio, y Sofía respondía vagamente a la sonrisa.

A la media hora habían salido de la circunvalación de Manchester y se hallaban en las carreteras rurales de Cheshire, lustrosas, lisas, sinuosas. Era la estación del año en la que no hay noche; sólo día y crepúsculo, en la que la última plata del anochecer sigue siendo obstinadamente visible durante horas. Y en campo abierto, bajo el arco melancólico de la tarde, la tristeza de la tierra parecía embargar de nuevo a Sofía. Sólo entonces se dio cuenta de la intensidad de la dura prueba por la que estaba pasando.

Al sur de Congleton uno de los neumáticos se aflojó, inmediatamente después de que Dick hubiese encendido los faros. Detuvo el automóvil y bajó. Estaban a dos millas de Ashbury, el pueblo más cercano. Acababa de coger la bolsa de herramientas, con la resignación de la experiencia, cuando Lily exclamó:

—¿Está dormida o qué le ocurre? —Sofía no estaba dormida pero sí, al parecer, inconsciente.

Era una situación difícil y extrema para dos enamorados. Sus voces cambiaron al momento, adoptando

un tono de alarma y consternación, y luego recobraron la firmeza. Sofía daba signos de vida pero no de razón. Lily sintió latir el corazón de la pobre anciana.

—¡Bien; no hay más remedio! —dijo Dick cuando todos sus esfuerzos por reanimarla fracasaron.

—¿Qué..., qué vas a hacer?

—Ir a casa todo lo rápido que pueda con tres neumáticos. La colocaremos de este costado y tú la sostendrás. Así quitaremos el peso del otro costado.

Volvió a dejar la bolsa de herramientas en su caja. Lily admiró su decisión.

Fue de esta manera, ya no bajo el hechizo de la cambiante belleza de los paisajes nocturnos, como concluyeron el viaje. Constanza abrió la puerta antes de que el auto se detuviera en la oscuridad de King Street. Los jóvenes pensaron que encajó bien el golpe, si bien el entrar en casa el cuerpo inerte y tembloroso de Sofía, con el sombrero torcido con abandono, fue un espectáculo como para angustiar a un alma más robusta que la de Constanza.

Hecho esto, Dick dijo lacónicamente:

—Me voy. Vosotras quedaos aquí, claro.

—¿Dónde vas? —le preguntó Lily.

—¡Por el médico! —repuso bruscamente Dick, cojeando a toda prisa escalones abajo.

IV

La extraordinaria violencia de aquel giro en los acontecimientos fue lo que más conmocionó a Constanza, aunque no la abrumó. Menos de doce horas antes —qué va, seis horas escasas— ella y Sofía llevaban su plácida y monótona existencia, no perturbada por nada peor que la enfermedad y la muerte de unos perros o la perversidad de una sirvienta. Y ahora, tras haber reaparecido el amenazador Gerald Scales, el cuerpo de Sofía yacía, misterioso y atemorizador, en el sofá, y ella y Lily Holl, una muchacha a la que no había conocido sino aquel mismo día, clavaban los ojos en ella una al lado de la otra, compartiendo íntimamente la misma alarma. Constanza se puso a la altura de la crisis. Ya no podía apoyarse en la energía y la capacidad decisoria de Sofía, y la Baines que había en ella había despertado. Todas sus preocupaciones cotidianas quedaron reducidas a la dimensión de insignificancia que les era propia. Ni la joven ni la mujer de edad sabían qué hacer. Podían aflojarle la ropa, acercar inútiles reconstituyentes a aquella boca atormentada: eso era todo. Sofía no estaba inconsciente, como se podía deducir de sus ojos, pero no podía hablar ni hacer señas; su cuerpo sufría frecuentes convulsiones. Así pues, las mujeres aguardaron y la sirvienta aguardó, algo apartada. La visión de Sofía había obrado una asombrosa transformación en Maud. Maud era una muchacha diferente. Constanza no podía reconocer en su ansioso y deferente afán por ser útil el pizpireto descaro de la desvergonzada. Había cambiado como lo habría hecho un libertino de la Edad Media por obra de una milagrosa aparición. ¡Acaso fuera el paso decisivo en la trayectoria de Maud!

El doctor Stirling llegó antes de que hubiesen pasado diez minutos. Dick Povey tuvo el tino de irlo a buscar a la reunión de la Federación en el ayuntamiento. Y la llegada del médico y de Dick, ruidosamente y a toda velocidad en el automóvil, constituyó una segunda sensación. El médico preguntó inmediatamente qué había sucedido. Nadie pudo decirle nada. Constanza había confiado ya a Lily Holl el motivo de la visita a Manchester, pero eso era cuanto sabía. Ni una sola persona en Bursley, excepto Sofía, sabía lo que había ocurrido en Manchester. Pero Constanza infirió que Gerald Scales había muerto; de lo contrario, Sofía no habría vuelto tan pronto. Entonces el médico sugirió que, por el contrario, tal vez estuviera fuera de peligro. Y todos imaginaron a aquel fastidioso Gerald Scales, aquel oscuro y siniestro marido que había causado tan violento trastorno.

Entretanto, el médico se puso a trabajar. Envió a Dick Povey a casa de Critchlow, si la farmacia estaba cerrada, por un medicamento. Luego, al cabo de un rato, levantó a Sofía tal como estaba, se la echó al hombro como un fardo *y* la subió él solo al segundo piso. Había dado recientemente un curso a los entusiastas de la Asociación de Ambulancia Saint John, de Bursley. La hazaña pareció cosa de un superhombre. En la memoria

de Constanza quedó impresa sobre todo la imagen del corpulento médico ascendiendo cauta y delicadamente por la sinuosa y crujiente escalera, con cuidado de preservar a Sofía de todo contacto brusco; su traspié en los dos peldaños de en medio del pasillo; la cabeza de Sofía y su cabello suelto, y después el médico poniéndola con suavidad en la cama, dejando escapar un largo suspiro y agitando su gran pañuelo, y todo ello bajo las crudas luces y sombras de las lámparas de gas. El médico estaba desconcertado. Constanza le hizo un nuevo relato del primer ataque de Sofía en París, más o menos como se lo había oído contar a Sofía. Él dijo al instante que no podía tratarse de lo que había dicho el médico francés. Constanza se encogió de hombros. No le sorprendía. Para ella, un médico francés era necesariamente una especie de charlatán. Dijo que sólo sabía lo que le había contado Sofía. Pasado un tiempo, el doctor Stirling decidió probar con la electricidad y Dick Povey lo llevó a la consulta por el equipo. Las mujeres se quedaron solas de nuevo. Constanza estaba muy impresionada por la actitud sensata y solidaria de Lily Holl. «¡No sé lo que habría hecho sin la señorita Lily!», exclamaba después. Hasta Maud era merecedora de toda alabanza. Parecía que estaban en mitad de la noche cuando regresó el doctor Stirling, pero apenas eran las once y la gente empezaba a volver del teatro y del *music hall* de Hanbridge. El uso del equipo eléctrico fue un espectáculo espantoso. Era angustioso ver a Sofía inerte a pesar de su acción. Esperaron el resultado conteniendo el aliento. Y no hubo resultado. Ni las inyecciones ni la electricidad lograron influir en la parálisis de la boca y la garganta de Sofía. Todo había fracasado.

—¡Sólo queda esperar! —dijo el médico en voz baja. Todos aguardaron en la habitación. Sofía parecía haber entrado en una especie de coma. La distorsión de su hermoso rostro se hacía más marcada conforme pasaba el tiempo. El médico hablaba de vez en cuando en susurros. Dijo que el ataque había sido causado en última instancia por el frío producido por el rápido movimiento del automóvil. Dick Povey musitó que tenía que ir a Hanbridge a comunicar a los padres de Lily que no se alarmaran por ella y que volvería enseguida. Les tenía mucho afecto. En el rellano vecino a la habitación, el médico le murmuró: «U.P[60]». Y Dick hizo un gesto de asentimiento. Eran grandes amigos.

De vez en cuando, el médico, que nunca sabía cuándo estaba vencido, probó nuevos métodos para tratar el caso de Sofía. Siguieron nuevos síntomas. Eran las doce y media cuando, tras contemplar con especial intensidad a la paciente y tras haberle examinado la boca y el corazón, se enderezó lentamente y miró a Constanza.

—¿Todo ha terminado? —dijo ésta.

Y él movió ligeramente la cabeza.

—Vamos abajo, por favor —la conminó en la pausa que se produjo. Constanza mostró un valor sorprendente. El médico estuvo muy solemne y amable; Constanza no lo había visto nunca en tan heroica actitud. La condujo fuera de la habitación con infinita gentileza. No había ningún motivo para permanecer allí; Sofía había muerto. Constanza quiso quedarse junto a su cuerpo, pero la norma era que había que alejar a los dolientes; el médico observó esta estricta norma y Constanza pensó que tenía razón y que debía obedecer. Lily Holl la siguió. La sirvienta, que supo la verdad merced a la intuición que se reconoce a las naturalezas primitivas, estalló en ruidosos sollozos, clamando que Sofía había sido el ama más excelente que jamás hubiera tenido una criada. El médico le dijo enojado que no se quedara allí gimoteando y que se fuera a la cocina y cerrara la puerta si no se podía dominar. Descargó como un trueno toda su agitación nerviosa acumulada sobre Maud. Constanza siguió comportándose maravillosamente. Era la admiración del médico y de Lily Holl. Entonces volvió Dick Povey. Se acordó que Lily pasara la noche con Constanza. Al final el médico y Dick se marcharon juntos; el primero se hizo cargo de las disposiciones funerarias. Se obligó a Maud a acostarse.

Constanza se levantó muy temprano de su propia cama. Eran las cinco y ya se había hecho de día más de dos horas antes. Se movió sin hacer ruido y miró al sofá por encima de los pies de la cama. Allí estaba Lily tranquilamente dormida, con la suave respiración de un niño. Lily habría juzgado que ella era una mujer muy madura que había visto mucho en la vida. Pero para Constanza su rostro y su actitud tenían la calidad exquisita de la infancia. No era exactamente una muchacha bonita, pero sus rasgos, la cándida expresión de su disposición producían un efecto afín al de la belleza. Su abandono era total. Había salido indemne de aquella noche y ahora se estaba renovando en un sueño sosegado y ajeno a todo. Se dejaba ver entonces su ingenuo aire de niña. Parecía como si toda su conducta prudente y amable de la tarde anterior no fuera otra cosa que gestos imitativos. Parecía imposible que un ser tan joven y fresco hubiera experimentado realmente el estado de ánimo del cual eran expresión sus gestos. Su enérgica sencillez virginal hizo que Constanza se sintiera vagamente triste por ella.

Constanza salió sigilosamente de la habitación y subió al segundo piso; entró en su vestidor y después en la otra cámara. Se sentía obligada a ver otra vez el cadáver de Sofía. ¡Qué increíble rapidez la de la calamidad! ¿Quién podría haberlo previsto? Constanza estaba menos desolada que paralizada. Aún no había

hecho más que rozar los bordes de su pesar. No había empezado a pensar en sí misma. Contemplando el cuerpo de Sofía, se sentía inundada de compasión no por sí misma sino por el inmenso desastre de la vida de su hermana. Entonces percibió plenamente por primera vez la enormidad de aquel desastre. El encanto y la belleza de Sofía, ¿de qué le servían ahora a su propietaria? Vio imágenes de la trayectoria de Sofía, imágenes distorsionadas y grotescas que se habían formado en su poco viajada mente a partir de los escasos y resumidos relatos de su hermana. ¡Qué historia! ¡Una breve pasión, y luego casi treinta años en una casa de huéspedes! Y Sofía no había tenido un hijo; no había conocido la alegría ni el dolor de la maternidad. Ni siquiera había tenido un verdadero hogar hasta que, en todo su estéril esplendor, llegó a Bursley. ¡Y había terminado así! Ése era el lamentable e ignominioso fin de los extraordinarios dones de cuerpo y alma de Sofía. La suya no había sido vida. ¿Y por qué? ¡Es extraño cómo el destino se empeña en justificar las duras generalizaciones de la moral puritana, de la moral en la que habían educado a Constanza sus estrictos padres! Sofía había pecado. Era por tanto inevitable que pagara por ello. Una aventura como la que, con su orgullo perverso y caprichoso, había emprendido con Gerald Scales no podía acabar de otra manera. No podría haber acarreado nada más que mal. No había modo de escapar a estas verdades, pensó Constanza. Y había que disculparla por creer que todo el progreso y el ingenio modernos no son nada y que el mundo se vería obligado a volver sobre sus pasos y a empezar de nuevo por el camino que había abandonado.

Hasta pocos días antes de su muerte, la gente acostumbraba a observar que la señora Scales parecía tan joven como siempre y que estaba tan vital y vigorosa como siempre. Y verdaderamente, mirándola a cierta distancia —aquel hermoso óvalo, aquel porte erguido del esbelto cuerpo, aquella mirada desafiante— nadie habría dicho que tenía sesenta años. Pero ¡miradla ahora, con el rostro retorcido, las pupilas sin vista, la piel gastada; no parecía tener sesenta, sino setenta! ¡Parecía una cosa usada, agotada y arrojada a un lado! Sí; a Constanza se le deshizo el corazón de angustiada piedad por aquel ser tempestuoso. Y mezclado con la piedad había un severo reconocimiento de la actuación de la justicia divina. Acudió a los labios de Constanza la misma frase que había acudido a los de Samuel Povey en una ocasión muy diferente: «¡De Dios no hay quien se burle!». Las ideas de sus padres y sus abuelos habían permanecido intactas en Constanza. Es cierto que su padre se hubiera estremecido en el Cielo si hubiera visto a Constanza haciendo solitarios por la noche. Pero a pesar de las cartas, y de un hijo que nunca iba a la iglesia, Constanza, sometida a las diversas influencias del destino, había seguido siendo en lo esencial lo mismo que su padre. No se dejaba ver en ella la fuerza de la evolución. Hay miles de personas así.

Lily, que se había despertado y vestido con el semblante irreal de una mujer adulta y comprensiva, entró en la habitación sin hacer ruido, buscando a la pobre anciana. Había venido el amortajador.

En el primer correo llegó una carta del señor Till Boldero dirigida a Sofía. De su contenido se deducía claramente la muerte de Gerald Scales. Entonces, según parecía, a Constanza ya no le quedaba nada que hacer. Se había hecho por ella cuanto se podía hacer. Y voluntades más fuertes que la suya la metieron en cama. Telegrafiaron a Cyril. Acudió de visita el señor Critchlow, seguido de la señora Critchlow: una molesta carga, pero útil en determinados asuntos. No se permitió al señor Critchlow ver a Constanza. Ella oyó su chirriante voz en el pasillo. Tenía que estar allí acostada y tranquila, y el repentino sosiego resultaba extraño después de la febril violencia de la noche. ¡Sólo veinticuatro horas antes estaba preocupada por la muerte de un perro! Su cuerpo estaba anhelante de sueño; se durmió, y los pensamientos sobre el misterio de la vida se fundieron con las incoherencias de los sueños.

La noticia se difundió por la Plaza antes de las nueve. Algunas personas habían presenciado la llegada del automóvil y el traslado de Sofía a la casa. Se habían extendido falsos rumores sobre la muerte de Gerald Scales. Según algunos, se había suicidado. Pero la ciudad, aunque excitada, no se conmovió como se habría conmovido por un acontecimiento similar veinte años antes, o incluso diez. Los tiempos habían cambiado en Bursley. Bursley era más sofisticada que en los días de antaño.

Constanza temía que Cyril, a pesar de la gravedad de la ocasión, se retrasara como tenía por costumbre. Había aprendido hacía mucho a no confiar en él. Pero llegó aquella misma tarde. Su comportamiento fue perfecto en todos los sentidos. Mostró una aflicción serena pero sincera por la muerte de su tía. Además, se hizo cargo inmediatamente de todas las disposiciones, tanto con respecto a Sofía como a su marido. Constanza estaba sorprendida de la facilidad que mostró en la dirección de cuestiones prácticas y la seguridad con que daba órdenes. Nunca lo había visto dirigir algo. Él incluso dijo que nunca había dirigido nada, pero que le parecía que no tenía ninguna dificultad, en tanto que Constanza se había, imaginado una fastidiosa serie de variadas complicaciones. En cuanto al entierro de Sofía, Cyril se manifestó enérgicamente a favor de un funeral absolutamente privado, es decir, al cual no asistiera nadie más que él. Parecía desaprobar con pasión todo género de exhibiciones. Constanza estaba de acuerdo con él, pero dijo que sería imposible no invitar al señor Critchlow, el fideicomisario de Sofía, y que si se invitaba al señor Critchlow habría que invitar a otros. Cyril preguntó:

—¿Por qué imposible?

Constanza dijo:

—Porque *sería* imposible. Porque el señor Critchlow se sentiría ofendido.

Y Cyril replicó:

—¿Qué más da que se sienta ofendido? —e indicó que el señor Critchlow se recuperaría del daño. Constanza se puso más seria. La discusión amenazaba acalorarse. Repentinamente Cyril cedió.

—¡Está bien, señora Plover, está bien! Será exactamente como usted diga —dijo, en tono suavemente humorístico. Hacía años que no la llamaba «señora Plover». Ella pensó que no era un momento muy oportuno para jocosidades verbales, pero el joven fue tan amable que ella no se quejó. Así pues, hubo seis personas en el funeral de Sofía, incluyendo al señor Critchlow. No se ofrecieron refrigerios. Los dolientes se separaron en la iglesia. Cuando los dos funerales concluyeron, Cyril se sentó al armonio y tocó suavemente; dijo que el instrumento estaba bien afinado. La presencia del joven resultó extraordinariamente tranquilizadora.

Tenía a la sazón treinta y tres años. Sus hábitos eran tan diligentes como siempre y su preocupación por su arte igual de entusiasta. Pero no había logrado fama ni éxito. No tenía ganancias y vivía con toda comodidad de la asignación de su madre. Rara vez hablaba de sus planes y nunca de sus esperanzas. De hecho se había adaptado a ser un diletante, habiendo aprendido a despreciar los triunfos que no tenía fuerzas para conquistar. Se imaginaba que la diligencia y una vida regular eran suficiente justificación en sí mismas para la vida de cualquier hombre. Constanza había perdido la costumbre de esperar que asombrase al mundo. Los modales de Cyril eran graves y precisos, corteses y tibios, con un toque de condescendencia hacia su entorno, como si estuviese constantemente permitiendo a los perspicaces darse cuenta de que no le quedaba nada por aprender..., ¡si se supiera la verdad! Su humor había asumido una forma diferente. A menudo sonreía para sí. Era anodino.

El día siguiente del funeral de Sofía se puso a trabajar para diseñar una sencilla piedra para la tumba de su tía. Dijo que no soportaría una lápida corriente, que siempre le daba la impresión de que el viento podría derribarla, negando así la idea de la solidez. Su madre no entendió nada de lo que dijo. Pensó que la inscripción de su lápida era afectada y recargada, pero la dejó pasar sin comentario, secretamente halagada ya sólo porque se hubiera dignado diseñar una lápida.

Sofía había dejado todo su dinero a Cyril y lo había nombrado su único albacea testamentario. Esta disposición había sido acordada con Constanza. Las hermanas pensaron que era el mejor plan. Cyril no tuvo en cuenta para nada al señor Critchlow y acudió a un joven abogado de Hanbridge, amigo suyo y de Matthew Peel-Swynnerton. El señor Critchlow, de edad avanzada y poco acostumbrado a interferencias, tuvo que rendir cuentas de su fideicomiso a aquel joven y se sintió indignado. El patrimonio resultó ser de un valor de más de treinta y cinco mil libras. En conjunto, Sofía había sido prudente, incluso mezquina. A menudo decía a Constanza que debía gastar con mucha más libertad; ella había tenido unos pocos arranques de extravagancia. Pero el hábito de la severa frugalidad, iniciado en 1870 y practicado sin interrupción hasta que llegó a Inglaterra en 1897, había sido demasiado fuerte para sus teorías. El despilfarro de dinero la hacía sufrir. Y a su edad no podía inventarse gustos caros.

Cyril no dejó traslucir emoción alguna al saberse heredero de treinta y cinco mil libras. No pareció que le importara. Hablaba de aquella cantidad como podría hacerlo un millonario. En justicia hay que decir que la riqueza no le importaba nada, excepto en la medida en que pudiera complacer a su vista y a su oído, educados en la voluptuosidad artística. Pero, por su madre y por Bursley, podría haber afectado alguna satisfacción. Su madre se sentía en cierto modo ofendida. La conducta del joven la inducía a volver una y otra vez a la meditación sobre la inutilidad de la trayectoria de Sofía y el desperdicio de sus atributos. Había envejecido y se había endurecido en años sin alegría para amasar aquel dinero, que Cyril se gastaría fríamente y con ingratitud, sin pesar jamás en el inmenso esfuerzo e infinito sacrificio que había costado reunirlo. Se lo gastaría con tanta despreocupación como si se lo hubiera encontrado en la calle. Conforme pasaban los días y Constanza se daba cuenta de su propio dolor, también se fue dando cada vez más cuenta de la absoluta tragedia de la vida de Sofía. La testaruda Sofía había engañado a su madre, y había pagado el engaño con treinta años de melancolía y toda la frustración de su destino.

Después de estar quince días dando vueltas por Bursley elegantemente vestido de negro, Cyril, sin previo aviso, dijo una noche:

—Tengo que irme pasado mañana, madre. —Y le habló de un viaje a Hungría planeado en firme desde hacía mucho tiempo con Matthew Peel-Swynnerton y que no se podía aplazar, ya que comprendía «negocios». Hasta entonces no había dicho una palabra de aquello. Era tan reservado como siempre. En cuanto a las vacaciones de su madre, sugirió que podía irse con los Holl y Dick Povey. Veía con buenos ojos a Lily Holl y a

Dick Povey. De Dick Povey dijo:

—Es uno de los tipos más notables de las Cinco Ciudades. —Y tenía el aspecto de haber construido la reputación de Dick. Constanza, sabiendo que no había apelación, aceptó la sentencia de soledad. Su salud era singularmente buena.

Cuando su hijo se hubo marchado, se dijo: «¡Hace apenas dos semanas Sofía estaba sentada a esta mesa!». De vez en cuando recordaba, con una ligera conmoción, que la pobre Sofía, orgullosa y dominante, había muerto.

Capitulo V

FIN DE CONSTANZA

I

Una tarde de junio, unos doce meses después, Lily Holl entró en el salón de la señora Povey, que daba a la Plaza, a visitar a una dama tranquila, optimista, envejecida para su edad —poco más de sesenta años— y cuyos principales enemigos eran la ciática y el reumatismo. La ciática era un querido enemigo al cual la indulgente Constanza se refería siempre en tono afectuoso como «mi ciática»; el reumatismo era un recién llegado, sin privilegios, del que su víctima hablaba temerosa y sin embargo desdeñosamente como «este reumatismo». Constanza estaba ahora muy gruesa. Estaba sentada en una silla baja y cómoda entre la mesa ovalada y la ventana; iba ataviada de seda negra. Cuando entró la muchacha, Constanza levantó la cabeza con una sonrisa insulsa y Lily la besó con satisfacción. Lily sabía que sus visitas eran bienvenidas. Las dos se habían hecho tan amigas como permitía su diferencia de edad; de las dos, Constanza era la más franca. Lily, al igual que Constanza, iba de luto. Pocos meses antes había muerto su abuelo, «Holl, el tendero». El padre de Lily, segundo de sus dos hijos, había dejado el negocio fundado por los hermanos en Hanbridge para dirigir por un tiempo la tienda paterna de la Plaza de San Lucas. La muerte de Alderman Holl había retrasado la boda de Lily. Ésta tomaba el té con Constanza, o al menos la visitaba, cuatro o cinco veces a la semana. Escuchaba a Constanza.

Todo el mundo consideraba que Constanza «había superado magníficamente» la terrible experiencia de la muerte de Sofía. Incluso se observó que estaba más filosófica, más animada y más amable de como había estado durante muchos años. La verdad era que, aunque la pérdida le había ocasionado una aflicción en extremo auténtica y duradera, había sido un alivio para ella. Cuando Constanza tenía más de cincuenta años, la enérgica y autoritaria Sofía había irrumpido en su letárgica tranquilidad y había perturbado gravemente sus viejas costumbres. Cierto es que Constanza había combatido a Sofía en el punto principal y había ganado, pero en cien puntos menores había perdido o no había luchado. Sofía había sido «demasiado» para Constanza, que sólo con un agotador derroche de fuerza nerviosa había logrado defender una pequeña parte de sí misma del dominio inconsciente de Sofía. La muerte de la señora Scales puso punto final a todo aquel esfuerzo y Constanza fue de nuevo la dueña de su casa. Ella nunca hubiera reconocido estos hechos, ni siquiera a sí misma, y nadie se habría atrevido jamás a indicárselos, pues a pesar de la afabilidad de su temperamento tenía su lado formidable.

Estaba colocando una fotografía en un álbum forrado de felpa.

—¿Más fotografías? —preguntó Lily. Tenía casi exactamente la misma sonrisa benévola que Constanza. Parecía la personificación de la amabilidad, uno de esos lechos de plumas con que algunos hombres caprichosos tienen la suerte de casarse. Era capaz, con un toque de honrada y sencilla estupidez. Todo su carácter se puso de manifiesto en el tono en el que dijo «¿Más fotografías?». Mostró una ansiosa simpatía receptiva por el culto de Constanza a las fotografías, y una ligera afición personal por ellas, y una vaga percepción de que el culto a las fotografías podía llegar al ridículo, y un amable deseo de ocultar todo signo de tal percepción. Su voz era débil y hacía juego con su pálido cutis y su delicado rostro.

Los ojos de Constanza despidieron un destello socarrón detrás de las gafas cuando ella tendió en silencio la fotografía a Lily para que la examinara.

Lily se sentó; al contemplar la fotografía movió la cabeza varias veces, de forma casi imperceptible, y las comisuras de sus suaves labios bajaron.

—Su señoría acaba de dármela —susurró Constanza.

—¿De veras? —dijo Lily con un acento extraño.

«Su señoría» era la última y la mejor de las sirvientas de Constanza, una mujer de treinta años, realmente excelente, que había conocido la desdicha y sin duda había sido enviada a Constanza por la antigua y vigilante Providencia. Se llevaban casi perfectamente bien. Su nombre era Mary. Tras diez años de agitación, Constanza descansaba por fin por lo que atañe a las criadas.

—Sí —dijo Constanza—. Me dijo varias veces que quería hacerse una fotografía, y la semana pasada le di permiso para ir. ¿Te lo dije, verdad? Siempre le tengo consideración para todo, para sus pequeños caprichos y esas cosas. Y las copias llegaron hoy. Yo no heriría sus sentimientos por nada del mundo. Puedes estar segura de que echará un vistazo al álbum la próxima vez que limpie la habitación.

Constanza y Lily cambiaron una mirada, de acuerdo en que Constanza había llegado al colmo de la afabilidad poniendo la fotografía de una criada entre las mismas cubiertas que las de su familia. Era de dudar que tal cosa se hubiera hecho alguna vez.

Una fotografía suele seguir a otra, y un álbum de fotografías a otro álbum de fotografías.

—Pásame ese álbum del segundo estante del revistero, querida —pidió Constanza.

Lily se levantó con vivacidad, como si ver el álbum del segundo estante del revistero hubiera sido la ambición de su vida.

Se sentaron a la mesa, una al lado de otra; Lily pasaba las páginas. Constanza, a pesar de su enorme volumen, hacía continuamente pequeños movimientos nerviosos. De vez en cuando sorbía y en ocasiones se producía en su pecho un ruido misterioso; siempre fingía que aquel ruido era una tos y ayudaba al fingimiento con una tosecita inmediatamente después.

—¡Anda! —exclamó Lily—, ¿He visto ésta antes?

—No lo sé, querida —respondió Constanza—¿La has visto?

Era una foto de Sofía hecha unos años antes por «un caballero muy agradable» al que las hermanas habían conocido durante unas vacaciones en Harrogate. Sofía estaba en una loma, enfrentándose a los elementos.

—Es la señora Scales —dijo Lily.

—Sí —corroboró Constanza—. Allá donde hubiera un ventarrón se ponía así y respiraba hondo.

Esta reminiscencia de uno de los hábitos de Sofía la revivió en la memoria de Constanza y trazó una imagen de su carácter para la muchacha, que apenas la había conocido.

—No es como las fotografías corrientes. Tiene algo especial —dijo Lucy, en tono entusiasta—. Creo que nunca he visto una como ésta.

—Tengo otra copia en mi habitación —dijo Constanza— Te daré ésta.

—¡Oh, señora Povey! ¡No me podía imaginar...!

—¡Sí, sí! —insistió Constanza, quitando la foto de la hoja.

—¡Oh, gracias!—exclamó Lily.

—Y esto me recuerda... —dijo Constanza, levantándose con gran dificultad de la silla.

—¿Puedo ir a traerle algo? —preguntó Lily.

—¡No, no! —contestó Constanza, saliendo de la habitación.

Al momento volvió con su joyero, un receptáculo de ébano con ornamentos de marfil.

—Quería darte esto —dijo, sacando de la caja un hermoso camafeo—. No creo que me apetezca llevarlo. Y me gustaría vértelo a ti. Era de mi madre. Creo que van a ponerse de moda otra vez. No veo razón para que no lo puedas llevar aunque estés de luto. El luto no es ni la mitad de estricto que antes.

—¡Oh, no sé qué decir! —murmuró Lily, en éxtasis. Se dieron un beso. Constanza parecía respirar benevolencia cuando con sus manos temblonas puso a Lily el broche en el cuello. Prodigaba el cálido tesoro de su corazón con Lily, a la que consideraba como una muchacha casi perfecta y que se había convertido en su ídolo de aquellos años.

—¡Qué reloj antiguo tan magnífico! —exclamó Lily mientras ambas hurgaban en los rincones del joyero—. ¡Y qué cadena!

—Eran de papá —dijo Constanza—. Tuvo siempre una fe ciega en él. Cuando no iba con el del Ayuntamiento, decía: «Entonces el del Ayuntamiento va mal». Y, es curioso, el del Ayuntamiento iba mal. Ya sabes que nunca ha dado la hora bien. Se me ha ocurrido dar este reloj y la cadena a Dick.

—¿De veras?

—Sí. Va tan bien como cuando lo usaba mí padre. Mi marido no lo usó nunca. Prefería el suyo. Tenía pequeños caprichos como ése. Y Cyril se parece a su padre. —Hablaba en su tono «seco»—. Tengo casi decidido dárselo a Dick, es decir, si se porta bien. ¿Sigue todavía con eso de los globos?

Lily esbozó una sonrisa culpable.

—¡Oh, sí!

—Bueno —repuso Constanza—, ¡Nunca oí nada igual! Ya es bastante con que suba y baje sin que le pase nada. Me pregunto cómo le dejas, querida.

—Pero ¿cómo puedo impedírselo? No tengo dominio sobre él.

—Pero ¿quieres decir que lo seguiría haciendo aunque le dijeras en serio que no querías?

—Sí —contestó Lily, y añadió—, por eso no se lo digo.

Constanza movió la cabeza, cavilando acerca de la secreta naturaleza de los hombres. Se acordaba demasiado bien de la cruel obstinación de Samuel, que sin embargo la quería. Y Dick Povey era mil veces más extravagante que Samuel. Lo vio con toda claridad de niño, bajando King Street como una bala en aquel cacharro y volándosele la gorra. ¡Después fueron los automóviles! ¡Ahora, los globos! Suspiró. Le asombró la profunda sabiduría instintiva que acababa de enunciar la muchacha.

—¡Bueno! —repitió—. Ya veré. Todavía no me he decidido del todo. Por cierto, ¿qué está haciendo esta tarde?

—Ha ido a Birmingham a tratar de vender dos camiones. No llegará a casa hasta tarde. Vendrá aquí mañana.

Como excelente ilustración de los métodos de Dick Povey, en aquel preciso instante Lily oyó en la Plaza el ruido de un motor, que resultó ser el coche de Dick. Se levantó de un salto para mirar.

—¡Caramba! —exclamó, sonrojándose—. ¡Aquí está!

—¡Señor, Señor! —musitó Constanza, cerrando la caja.

Cuando Dick, tras dejar el automóvil en King Street, entró cojeando, como una tromba, en el salón, infundiéndole nueva vida con su abundante vitalidad, gritó alegremente:

—¡He vendido mis camiones! ¡He vendido mis camiones! —Y explicó que por una bendita casualidad los había traspasado a un buscador de oportunidades en Hanbridge, justo antes de salir para Birmingham. De modo que había telefoneado a Birmingham para avisar que se cancelaba el asunto y luego, «como no tenia nada que hacer», vino a Bursley en busca de su prometida. En la tienda de Holl le dijeron que estaba con la señora Povey. Constanza lo miraba, impresionada por su aire jovial y triunfante. Era exactamente igual que sus anuncios de la *Señal,* despreocupados y seguros de sí mismos. Estaba absolutamente satisfecho de sí mismo. Triunfaba sobre su cojera, aquel constante recordatorio de una tragedia. ¿Quién podría imaginar, viendo aquella cara rubia, risueña y fulgurante, sorprendentemente juvenil para su edad, que una vez había vivido una noche como aquella en la que su padre mató a su madre mientras él yacía paralizado y maldiciendo, con la rodilla rota, en la cama? Constanza conocía toda la escena por su marido; se detuvo para asombrarse por los contradictorios azares de la existencia.

Dick Povey juntó las manos en una sonora palmada y luego se las frotó con rapidez.

—¡Ya un buen precio, además! —exclamó con regocijo— Señora Povey, no me importa decirle que me he embolsado setenta libras y pico esta tarde.

Los ojos de Lily expresaron su orgullosa alegría.

—Espero que el orgullo no sufra una caída —dijo Constanza, con una sosegada sonrisa que contenía un atisbo de reprimenda—.Eso es lo que espero. Tengo que ir a ocuparme del té.

—La verdad es que no puedo quedarme a tomar el té —dijo Dick.

—Claro que puedes —dijo Constanza, terminante—. ¿Y si hubieras ido a Birmingham? Hace semanas que no te quedas a tomar el té.

—¡Oh, bien, gracias! —cedió Dick, desairado.

—¿Puedo ahorrarle un viaje, señora Povey? —se ofreció Lily, ansiosamente amable.

—No, gracias, querida. Hay una o dos cosillas que requieren mi atención. —Y Constanza salió llevándose el joyero.

Dick, tras asegurarse de que la puerta estaba cerrada, asaltó a Lily con un beso.

—¿Hace mucho que has venido? —inquirió.

—Como hora y media.

—¿Te alegras de verme?

—¡Oh, Dick! —protestó ella.

—La anciana señora tiene una de sus venas, ¿eh?

—¡No, no! Es que estaba hablando de globos, ya sabes. Pone el grito en el cielo con ese asunto.

—No tienes que dejarla hablar de globos. Los globos pueden ser la ruina de su regalo de bodas para nosotros, niña.

—¡Dick! ¿Cómo puedes hablar así?... Está muy bien eso de decir que no la deje hablar de globos. ¡Intenta tú que deje de hablar de globos cuando empieza, y ya verás!

—¿Por qué empezó?

—Dijo que estaba pensando darte el viejo reloj de oro y la cadena del señor Baines, si te portabas bien.

—¡Gracias por nada! —dijo Dick—. No lo quiero.

—¿Lo has visto?

—¿Que si lo he visto? Ya lo creo que lo he visto. Ella ya lo había mencionado una o dos veces.

—¡Oh! No lo sabía.

—No me veo cargando con eso por ahí. Prefiero el mío. ¿A ti qué te parece?

—Desde luego, es bastante mazacote —dijo Lily— Pero si te lo regalara no podrías rechazarlo y tendrías que llevarlo.

—Bien, entonces —prosiguió Dick— tengo que tratar de portarme lo suficientemente mal como para que no me dé el reloj, pero no tan mal como para que cambie de idea en materia de regalos de boda.

—¡Pobrecilla! —murmuró Lily en tono compasivo.

Después se puso la mano en el cuello, sin decir nada.

—¿Qué es eso?

—Me lo ha dado ahora.

Dick se acercó para examinar el camafeo.

—¡Hum! —murmuró. Era un veredicto adverso. Y Lily mostró su acuerdo levantando las cejas.

—¡Y me imagino que tendrás que llevarlo! —dijo Dick.

—¡Lo tenía entre sus mejores posesiones, pobrecilla! —respondió Lily— Perteneció a su madre. Y ella dice que los camafeos se van a poner de moda otra vez. La verdad es que es muy bueno, ya lo ves.

—¡Me pregunto de dónde se habrá sacado esa idea! —dijo Dick con sequedad—. Ya veo que has estado padeciendo otra vez con las fotografías.

—Bueno —repuso Lily—, prefiero las fotografías a ayudarla a hacer solitarios. Las trampas que se hace a sí misma..., ¡qué tontería!

Se detuvo. La puerta, que después de todo no tenía echado el pasador, se abrió y el vejestorio de *Fossette* se introdujo penosamente en la habitación. Tenía afecto a Dick Povey.

—¡Hola, Matusalén! —saludó en voz alta al animal. Éste apenas pudo menear el rabo ni sacudirse el pelo de sus empañados ojos para levantar la vista hacia él. Dick se inclinó para darle unas palmaditas.

—Este perro huele —dijo Lily sin rodeos.

—¿Qué esperas? Lo que necesita es una dosis mínima de ácido prúsico. Es una carga para sí misma.

—Es curioso que si uno se aventura a insinuar a la señora Povey que este perro huele mal se pone hecha una furia —dijo Lily.

—Pues es bien sencillo —repuso Dick—. ¡No se lo insinúes y ya está! Tápate la nariz y refrena tu lengua.

—¡Dick, me gustaría que no fueses tan absurdo!

Volvió a entrar Constanza, cortando en seco la conversación.

—Señora Povey —empezó Dick, con una voz llena de gratitud—, Lily me ha enseñado el broche...

Reparó en que no le prestaba atención sino que se acercaba apresuradamente a la ventana.

—¿Qué pasa en la Plaza? —exclamó Constanza—. Ahora mismo, cuando estaba en la sala, vi a un hombre corriendo por Wegdwood Street y me dije: «¿qué pasará?».

Dick y Lily se reunieron con ella junto a la ventana.

Varias personas se precipitaban hacia la Plaza y luego acudió un hombre con un médico; venían de la plaza del mercado. Todas aquellas personas desaparecieron de la vista bajo la ventana del salón de la señora Povey, que daba a parte del establecimiento del señor Critchlow. Como las ventanas de la tienda sobresalían de los muros de la casa, era imposible ver desde la ventana del salón la acera de delante de aquélla.

—¡Debe de ser algo en la acera... o en la tienda! —murmuró Constanza.

—¡Oh, señora! —se oyó una voz sobresaltada detrás de los tres. Era Mary, el original de la fotografía, que había entrado corriendo en el salón sin ser vista—. ¡Dicen que la señora Critchlow ha intentado suicidarse!

Constanza retrocedió. Lily se acercó a ella con un instintivo gesto de consuelo.

—¡Que María Critchlow ha intentado suicidarse! —balbuceó Constanza.

—¡Sí, señora! Pero dicen que no lo ha hecho.

—¡Santo Cielo! Será mejor que vaya a ver si puedo ayudar, ¿no? —exclamó Dick, que salió cojeando, excitado y con precipitación—, «Qué extraño, ¿verdad? —diría después—, cómo me las arreglo para estar donde pasa algo. ¡Fue pura casualidad que estuviera allí aquel día! ¡Pero siempre me ocurre igual! Por lo que sea, siempre sucede algo extraordinario donde yo esté». Y esto también contribuía a su satisfacción y a su entusiasmo por la vida.

II

Cuando, avanzada la tarde, después de toda clase de idas y venidas, volvió por fin junto a la anciana y

a la joven para dar las últimas noticias, su comportamiento se adaptó al estado de ánimo de Constanza. La anciana señora se había sentido muy afectada por la tragedia, que, como ella dijo, había ocurrido bajo sus mismos pies mientras estaba charlando tranquilamente con Lily.

Toda la verdad salió a relucir en un breve espacio de tiempo. La señora Critchlow sufría de melancolía. Al parecer, llevaba mucho tiempo deprimida por la decadencia del negocio, que no era en absoluto culpa suya. El estado de la Plaza se había deteriorado de manera incesante. Ni siquiera la «Bodega» era lo mismo que antaño. Se habían cerrado cuatro o cinco tiendas definitivamente; los dueños habían abandonado toda esperanza de encontrar arrendatarios serios. Y de las que seguían abiertas, la mayoría luchaba desesperadamente por llegar a fin de mes. Sólo Holl y un pañero advenedizo, que había puesto anuncios de su establecimiento por todas partes, prosperaban realmente. La mitad dedicada a confitería del negocio del señor Brindley estaba desapareciendo. La gente no iba a Hanbridge por el pan o la verdura, pero sí por los pasteles. Los tranvías eléctricos se habían llevado a Hanbridge la crema —y buena parte de la leche— del comercio minorista de Bursley. En Hanbridge había comerciantes sin escrúpulos que estaban dispuestos a pagar la tarifa de transporte de todo cliente que gastase una corona en su establecimiento. Hanbridge era el centro geográfico de las Cinco Ciudades y era consciente de su situación. ¡Era inútil que Bursley compitiera! Si la señora Critchlow hubiera sido un filósofo, si hubiera sabido que la geografía siempre ha hecho la Historia, habría cedido su empresa diez años antes. Pero la señora Critchlow no era más que María Insull. Había visto Casa Baines en su espléndido apogeo, cuando Casa Baines hacía casi un favor a sus clientes al servirles. En la época en la que ella se hizo cargo del negocio bajo la tutela de su marido, aún era un buen negocio. Pero desde entonces se habían vuelto las tornas. Ella había luchado y había seguido luchando, estúpidamente. ¡No se dio cuenta de que estaba luchando contra la evolución; no se dio cuenta de que la evolución la había elegido como una de sus víctimas! Podía entender que todas las demás tiendas de la Plaza fracasaran, pero no que fracasara Casa Baines! ¡Ella era tan diligente como siempre, tan buena compradora, tan buena vendedora, tan interesada por las novedades, tan metódica! Y sin embargo los ingresos bajaban y bajaban.

Desde luego no abrigaba ninguna simpatía por Charles, que ahora se interesaba poco incluso por su propio negocio, o por lo que quedaba de él, y que sentía una fría indignación por el coste final de su matrimonio. Charles no le daba ningún dinero que pudiera evitar darle. La crisis se había ido acercando poco a poco a lo largo de los años. Las dependientas de la tienda no habían dicho nada o se habían limitado a cuchichear entre ellas, pero ahora que la crisis había estallado repentinamente con un intento de suicidio, hablaron todas a la vez y las pruebas fueron reconstruidas formando un formidable testimonio de la tensión bajo la que había estado la señora Critchlow. Resultó que llevaba meses deprimida e irritable, que en ocasiones se sentaba en medio de la jornada de trabajo y declaraba, con toda clase de muestras de agotamiento, que no podía más. Luego, con la misma celeridad, se ponía en pie y se obligaba a trabajar. Se pasaba noches enteras sin dormir. Una dependienta contó que se había quejado de no haber dormido nada en absoluto en cuatro noches consecutivas. Le zumbaban los oídos y tenía dolores de cabeza crónicos. Aunque nunca había sido gorda, había adelgazado cada vez más. Y estaba siempre tomando pastillas: esta información vino del gerente de Charles. Había tenido varias peleas vergonzosas con el temible Charles, para estupefacción de todos los que las oyeron o presenciaron... ¡La señora Critchlow haciendo frente a su marido! Otra cosa extraña era su idea de que las facturas de varias de las grandes empresas de Manchester estaban sin pagar, cuando lo cierto era que se habían pagado. Aunque le enseñaran los recibos no se quedaba convencida, si bien hacía ver que así era. Al día siguiente volvía a empezar. Todo esto bastaba para desconcertar a las dependientas de la pañería. Pero ¿qué podían hacer ellas?

Después, María Critchlow fue un poco más lejos. Había llamado a su rincón a la dependienta de más edad y la había informado, con toda la solemnidad de una confesión hecha para aliviar una conciencia largamente torturada, de que en numerosas ocasiones había sido culpable de irregularidad sexual con su antiguo patrón, Samuel Povey. No había verdad alguna en esta acusación (que todo el mundo, no obstante, se guardó bien de mencionar a Constanza); acaso indicaba simplemente las secretas aspiraciones de María Insull, la virgen. La dependienta se escandalizó como es debido, más por la crudeza del lenguaje de la señora Critchlow que por el supuesto pecado, enterrado en el pasado. ¡Sabe Dios lo que habría hecho la dependienta! Pero al cabo de dos horas María Critchlow trató de suicidarse con unas tijeras. Había sangre en la tienda.

Con la menor dilación posible la llevaron al manicomio. Charles Critchlow, revistiéndose defensivamente de una coraza de egoísmo senil, no dejó traslucir ninguna emoción y desarrolló muy poca actividad. La tienda se cerró. Y como pañería general no volvió a abrir. Éste fue el final de Casa Baines. Las dos dependientas se encontraron sin medio de vida. Los pequeños se hunden con los grandes.

La emoción de Constanza era más que disculpable; estaba justificada. No pudo comer ni Lily pudo convencerla de que lo hiciera. ¡En un momento inoportuno, Dick Povey mencionó —nunca pudo recordar cómo— la palabra «Federación»! Y entonces Constanza, la pasiva imagen de la aflicción, se convirtió en una amenaza. Abrumó a Dick Povey con su anatema de la Federación, pues Dick era ciudadano de Hanbridge,

donde había tenido su origen aquel detestable movimiento en pro de la Federación. Todas las desdichas de la Plaza de San Lucas se debían a ese vecino grande, ajetreado, avaricioso y carente de escrúpulos. ¿No había hecho ya bastante Hanbridge sin necesidad de fusionar a las Cinco Ciudades en una sola ciudad, de la cual ni que decir tiene que sería el centro? Para Constanza, Hanbridge era un municipio de aventureros sin principios que se habían propuesto arruinar a la antigua «Madre de las Cinco Ciudades» para su propia gloria y engrandecimiento. ¡No quería ni oír hablar de la Federación! ¡Su pobre hermana Sofía estaba rotundamente en contra de la Federación y tenía toda la razón! ¡Todas las personas verdaderamente respetables estaban en contra! El intento de suicidio de la señora Critchlow sellaba el destino de la Federación y la condenaba para siempre, a juicio de Constanza. Su aborrecimiento se intensificó hasta convertirse en violenta animadversión, hasta tal extremo que como consecuencia murió mártir de la causa de la independencia municipal de Bursley.

III

Fue un turbio día de octubre cuando se libró en Bursley la primera gran batalla por y contra la Federación. Constanza sufría de ciática. También sufría de repugnancia por el mundo moderno.

Habían ocurrido en la Plaza cosas inimaginables. Para Constanza, la reputación de la Plaza se había arruinado eternamente. Charles Critchlow, por esa extraña buena suerte que siempre hacía que le salieran las cosas bien cuando en justicia deberían salirle mal, había traspasado la tienda Baines y su propio establecimiento y su casa a la compañía Modas Midland, que estaba abriendo sucursales por Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire y condados adyacentes. Había vendido su farmacia y se había ido a vivir a una casita al final de King Street. Es dudoso que hubiera consentido en retirarse de no haber muerto Aldeman Holl el año anterior, acabando así una antigua rivalidad entre ambos ancianos por el patriarcado de la Plaza. Charles Critchlow estaba tan desprovisto de sentimientos como el que más, pero nadie lo está del todo, y el viejo estaba en situación de permitirse el sentimiento si así lo hubiera preferido. Su negocio no era una fuente de pérdidas y aún podía fiarse de sus flacas manos y de sus penetrantes ojos para componer una receta. Sin embargo, la oferta de Modas Midland le tentó y abandonó en triunfo la Plaza como el indiscutible «padre» de ésta.

Modas Midland no tenía sentido alguno de las convenciones del comercio. Su única idea era vender artículos. Habiendo tomado posesión de uno de los mejores lugares de una ciudad que, cuando todo estuvo dicho y hecho, tenía casi cuarenta mil habitantes, se propuso sacar el mayor provecho posible de dicho emplazamiento. Unieron las dos tiendas y encargaron una muestra comparada con la cual la antigua y amplia «Baines» era una tarjeta postal. Cubrieron toda la fachada con carteles como de función de teatro: ¡carteles de colores! Ocuparon la primera página de la *Señal* y desde aquel púlpito anunciaron que el invierno se aproximaba y que pretendían vender diez mil abrigos en su nueva tienda de Bursley al precio de doce con seis peniques cada uno. Se desafió ruidosa y burdamente a los sastres del mundo entero a igualar el precio de aquellos abrigos. El día de la inauguración dispusieron una orquesta o artillería de fonógrafos sobre el emplomado del escaparate de la parte de la tienda que había pertenecido al señor Critchlow. También alfombraron la Plaza de hojas volantes y se colocaron banderas en los pisos superiores. La enorme tienda estaba llena de abrigos; se mostraban abrigos en los tres grandes escaparates; en uno de ellos había un abrigo puesto a modo de receptáculo de agua, para demostrar que los abrigos Midland de doce con seis eran impermeables a la lluvia. En las dos entradas se agitaban más abrigos. Aquellas estratagemas despertaron y atrajeron a la ciudad, y la ciudad se vio recibida por bulliciosos dependientes varones muy enérgicos y rápidos en lugar de por recatadas y anémicas vírgenes. En algunos momentos, hacia las últimas horas de la tarde, la tienda estuvo abarrotada de clientes; el número de abrigos vendidos fue prodigioso. Otro día, Midland vendió pantalones de una manera semejante, pero sin los fonógrafos. Era inequívoco que Midland había sacudido a la Plaza y demostrado que el comercio todavía era posible para una empresa intrépida.

No obstante, la Plaza no se sentía complacida. Era consciente de la vergüenza, de la dignidad perdida. Constanza estaba dividida entre el dolor y una ira desdeñosa. Para ella, lo que había hecho Midland era profanar un santuario. Detestaba aquellas banderas y aquellos chillones carteles que lo miraban a uno de hito en hito desde los honrados muros de ladrillo, y la enorme muestra dorada, y los escaparates todos llenos de una monótona repetición del mismo artículo, y los bulliciosos dependientes. En cuanto a los fonógrafos, los consideraba un grave insulto: ¡estaban a siete metros de la ventana de su salón! ¡Abrigos de doce con seis! Era monstruoso, e igualmente monstruosa era la credibilidad de la gente. ¿Cómo podía ser «bueno» un abrigo de doce con seis? ¡Recordó los abrigos que se hacían y se vendían en la tienda en época de su padre y de su marido, unos abrigos cuyo inconveniente era que no se gastaban! Midland, para Constanza, no era una

empresa comercial sino algo entre un baratillo y un circo. Casi no podía soportar recorrer la Plaza, hasta tal punto ofendía a su vista y ultrajaba su orgullo ancestral la innoble fachada de Midland. Incluso dijo que iba a abandonar su casa.

Pero cuando, el veintinueve de septiembre, recibió el aviso previo de seis meses, firmado por la mano temblona de Critchlow, para que dejara la casa —la necesitaban para el gerente de Midland, pues Midland había tomado el local con la condición de poder echar a Constanza si querían—, el golpe fue extremadamente duro. Había jurado irse, ¡pero que la echaran, que la echaran de la casa en la que había nacido y del hogar paterno, eso era diferente! Su orgullo, aun herido, hubo de soportar mucho. Tuvo que recordar que era una Baines. Fingió magníficamente que no le importaba. Pero no pudo evitar decir a todos sus conocidos que la echaban de su casa y preguntarles lo que pensaban de *aquello;* y cuando se encontró con Charles Critchlow en la calle lo abrasó con el ardor de su resentimiento. La empresa de encontrar una nueva casa y mudarse a ella se le antojaba gigantesca, terrible; sólo pensarlo bastaba para ponerla enferma.

Entretanto, en el asunto de la Federación habían continuado los preparativos de la batalla campal, sobre todo en las columnas de la *Señal,* donde los escribas de cada una de las Cinco Ciudades habían probado que todas las demás ciudades estaban en las garras de unas bandas de interesados sin escrúpulos. Tras meses de discusiones y recriminaciones, todas las ciudades excepto Bursley eran favorables o indiferentes a la perspectiva de convertirse en parte de la duodécima ciudad más grande del Reino Unido. Pero en Bursley la oposición era fuerte, y la duodécima ciudad más grande del Reino Unido no podía surgir sin el consentimiento de Bursley. El Reino Unido mismo estaba lánguidamente interesado en la posibilidad de verse dotado de improviso de una nueva ciudad de un cuarto de millón de habitantes. Las Cinco Ciudades eran mencionadas con frecuencia en los diarios de Londres; los periodistas londinenses escribían frases como: «Las Cinco Ciudades, que son, *como todo el mundo sabe,* Hanbridge, Bursley, Knype, Longshaw y Turnhill... [61]». ¡Por fin era famosa la región más vilipendiada del país! Y, luego, un ministro del Gabinete había visitado las Cinco Ciudades; había asistido a una investigación oficial y había afirmado en su estilo machacón que pensaba hacer personalmente todo lo posible para llevar a término la Federación de las Cinco Ciudades: una observación imprudente que enfureció y al mismo tiempo halagó a los adversarios de la Federación en Bursley. Constanza, como muchas otras personas sensibles, preguntó airadamente qué derecho tenía un ministro del Gabinete a tomar partido en un asunto puramente local. Pero la parcialidad del mundo oficial se tornó flagrante. El alcalde de Bursley se proclamó abiertamente federacionista, aunque en el ayuntamiento había mayoría contra él. Hasta los pastores de las iglesias se permitieron pensar y expresar opiniones. ¡Si la indignada Vieja Guardia hubiera podido imaginar que había llegado el fin del decoro público! Los federacionistas eran unos individuos muy ingeniosos. Lograron reclutar en sus filas a un gran número de hombres destacados. Después alquilaron el mercado cubierto, instalaron una plataforma en él y colocaron a todos aquellos hombres destacados en la plataforma, y les hicieron hablar con elocuencia de las ventajas de avanzar con los tiempos. El mitin estuvo atestado de gente y hubo mucho entusiasmo; los lectores de la *Señal,* al día siguiente, no pudieron dejar de ver que la batalla estaba ganada de antemano y que la antifederación estaba muerta. Sin embargo, la semana siguiente, los antifederacionistas celebraron en el mercado cubierto un mitin similar (salvo en que la exhibición de hombres destacados fue menos brillante) y preguntaron a una asamblea de apretadas cabezas si la vieja Madre de las Cinco Ciudades estaba dispuesta a ponerse en manos de una pandilla de bien pagados burócratas de Hanbridge, y obtuvieron como respuesta un desaforado y desafiante «No» que se pudo oír en el Alto del Pato. Los lectores de la *Señal,* al día siguiente, vieron con placer que la batalla no estaba ganada de antemano. Bursley era tibio en temas de educación, barrios marginales, agua, gas, electricidad. Pero se proponía luchar por aquella cosa misteriosa, su identidad. ¿Había de perderse para el mundo el nombre de Bursley? Formular esa pregunta era dar la respuesta.

Después amaneció el día de la batalla, el día de la votación, en el que los ciudadanos habían de indicar claramente por medio de una cruz en una papeleta si querían Federación o no. Y ese día Constanza estaba casi incapacitada por la ciática. Fue un día heroico. Las paredes de la ciudad se cubrieron de letreros y las calles se llenaron de automóviles y otros vehículos al servicio de los votantes. Los más de aquellos vehículos llevaban grandes tarjetas con las palabras «Federación esta vez». Y centenares de hombres iban velozmente de acá para allá con tarjetas circulares sujetas a las solapas, como si Bursley fuera una carrera; en esas tarjetas se leían también las palabras «Federación esta vez». (Se refería a una votación que había tenido lugar varios años antes; no había suscitado ningún interés y el inmaduro proyecto sin embargo venció por una mayoría de seis a uno.) Todos los partidarios de la Federación llevaban una cinta roja; todos los antifederacionistas, una cinta azul. Se cerraron las escuelas y los federacionistas hicieron gala de su característica falta de escrúpulos apropiándose de los niños. Los federacionistas, con diabólica habilidad, contrataron a la Banda Municipal de Bursley, una organización de tremenda respetabilidad, y la pusieron en marcha por la ciudad tocando y seguida de carromatos llenos de niños apretujados que cantaban:

Votad, votad, votad por la Federación,

no seáis estúpidos, viejos y lentos,

estamos seguros de que será

bueno para la comunidad,

así pues votad, votad, votad y sacadla adelante.

No está claro cómo podía afectar este espectáculo a la decisión de unos graves ciudadanos en las urnas, pero los antifederacionistas temían que tal vez lo hiciera y antes del mediodía ya habían contratado a dos bandas y habían compuesto en comisión la siguiente letra como réplica a la primera:

Abajo, abajo, abajo la Federación;

como estamos nos queremos quedar;

cuando el sábado se vean los votos

muerta estará la Federación,

el bueno y viejo Bursley sin duda ganará.

También compusieron otra canción, titulada *Querido viejo Bursley,* que, sin embargo, cometieron el fatal error de adaptar a la música de *Auld Lang Syne*[62]. El efecto fue de canto fúnebre y quizá influyó a muchos votantes a favor del partido más alegre. Los antifederacionistas ni siquiera recuperaron la magra ventaja que les habían birlado los poco escrupulosos federacionistas con la ayuda de la Banda Municipal y de unos cuantos centenares de chiquillos. Los antifederacionistas lo tenían todo en su contra. ¡El alcalde había llegado a enviar a los habitantes una carta en la que se acusaba a los federacionistas de utilizar métodos desleales! ¡Aquello, ciertamente, era demasiado! Aquella insolencia dejó sin respiración a sus víctimas, y la respiración es muy necesaria en una competencia electoral. Los federacionistas, como reconoció uno de sus adversarios preeminentes, «hicieron lo que les dio la gana», al dominar tanto las calles como las paredes. Y cuando, a primera hora de la tarde, Dick Povey sobrevoló la ciudad en un globo decorado con el carmesí de la Federación, la impresión general fue que la causa de la identidad independiente de Bursley estaba perdida para siempre. Sin embargo, Bursley, con la obsequiosa ayuda de las tabernas, conservó su jovialidad.

IV

Al oscurecer, una anciana gruesa, de cabello gris y con un gorrito de poca gracia y un abrigo caro, subió cojeando, muy despacio, por Wedgwood Street y Cock Yard en dirección al ayuntamiento. Su rostro arrugado tenia una expresión de ansiedad. Los ajetreados y jubilosos federacionistas y antifederacionistas que no la conocían vieron simplemente a una anciana gruesa que caminaba apresuradamente; los que la conocían vieron simplemente a la señora Povey y la saludaron mecánicamente: una mujer de su edad y sus andares estaba notablemente fuera de lugar en aquel febril altercado de principios contrarios. Pero era algo más que una anciana gruesa, era algo más que la señora Povey lo que avanzaba torpemente, con tan penosa lentitud, por las calles: ¡era un milagro!

Aquella mañana, Constanza se había visto parcialmente incapacitada por su ciática; tanto, en cualquier caso, que se había dado cuenta de la conveniencia de quedarse en el piso del dormitorio en vez de bajar a la sala. Por tanto, Mary había encendido la chimenea del salón y Constanza se había instalado junto a ella, con *Fossette* en una cesta. Lily Holl había ido a visitarla temprano y se había mostrado muy comprensiva pero distraída. La verdad era que estaba ocultando el inminente ascenso en globo que Dick Povey, con su instinto para lo pintoresco, se las había arreglado para organizar, en unión con un conocido aeronauta de Manchester,

para el día mismo de la votación. Ése era uno de los varios asuntos que era preciso ocultar a la anciana señora. La propia Lily estaba muy inquieta por el ascenso en globo. Tuvo que ir corriendo a ver a Dick antes de que empezara, en el campo de fútbol de Bleakridge, y luego pasar las horas que habían de transcurrir hasta que recibiera un telegrama comunicándole que Dick había descendido sano y salvo, que se había roto la pierna al bajar o que se había matado. Fue una dura prueba para Lily. Dejó a Constanza tras una breve visita, con un aire de preocupación poco habitual en ella, diciendo que, como aquél era un día especial, volvería «si podía». Y no olvidó asegurar a Constanza que la Federación, sin la menor duda, sería lindamente derrotada en la votación, pues ésta era otra de las cosas sobre las cuales se juzgó aconsejable mantener «a oscuras» a la anciana, temiendo que se preocupara y cometiera alguna indiscreción.

Después de aquello, Constanza había sido olvidada por el mundo de Bursley, que poca atención podía prestar a ancianas con ciática confinadas a sofás y chimeneas. Sufría agudos dolores, como veía Mary cuando de tiempo en tiempo entraba a echarle un vistazo. Era sin duda uno de los días malos de Constanza, uno de aquellos días en los cuales sentía que la ola de la vida la había dejado varada en total abandono. El sonido de la Banda Municipal la sacó de su doloroso trance de padecimiento. Luego la sobresaltó el tiple alto de las voces de los niños. Desafió su ciática y, con una mueca, se acercó a la ventana. Y a la primera mirada se dio cuenta de que la votación sobre la Federación iba a ser mucho más apasionante de lo que se había imaginado. Los tarjetones que se balanceaban en los carromatos le demostraron que la Federación seguía de cualquier modo estando lo bastante viva como para ejercer una formidable impresión sobre la vista y el oído. La Plaza se transformó merced a aquel clamor en pro de la Federación; la gente vitoreaba y cantaba conforme la procesión avanzaba serpenteando. Y Constanza captó claramente las rítmicas y marciales sílabas, *«¡Votad, votad, votad!»*. Se sintió indignada. El barullo continuó. Con frecuencia pasaban vehículos por la Plaza como una exhalación, la mayoría de ellos con el distintivo carmesí. Los pequeños grupos y procesiones de excitados viandantes eran un rasgo que se repetía en aquel inhabitual tránsito; en su gran mayoría ostentaban el color de la Federación. Mary, después de ir a hacer algunas compras, subió y notificó a Constanza que «no había otra cosa que “Federación” por todas partes» y que el señor Brindley, un federacionista acérrimo, «se había subido un poco a la parra»; además, que había un enorme y universal interés por la votación. Dijo que había «montones y montones de gente» en torno al ayuntamiento. Hasta a Mary, por lo general un tanto apagada y de temperamento plácido, se le había pegado algo de aquella contagiosa vivacidad.

Constanza permaneció junto a la ventana hasta la hora de comer, y después volvió al mismo lugar. Fue una suerte que no se le ocurriera mirar al cielo cuando el globo de Dick voló hacia el oeste; habría sospechado de inmediato que Dick iba en aquel globo y sus agravios se habrían multiplicado. El inmenso agravio del proyecto de la Federación la abrumaba hasta el extremo de su capacidad. Ella no era un político; no tenía ideas generales; no veía el movimiento cósmico en grandes curvas. Era incapaz de percibir el absurdo que suponía perpetuar unas divisiones municipales que el crecimiento del distrito había vuelto artificiales, irritantes y perjudiciales. No veía nada más que a Bursley y en Bursley nada más que la Plaza. No sabía nada excepto que la gente de Bursley, que otrora hacía sus compras en Bursley, ahora las hacía en Hanbridge, y que la Plaza era un desierto infestado de baratillos. ¡Y había realmente personas deseosas de agachar la cerviz ante Hanbridge, dispuestas a sacrificar el nombre mismo de Bursley al capricho rapaz de esa avasalladora Chicago! ¿Sabían acaso que la pobre María Critchlow estaba en un manicomio porque Hanbridge era tan codiciosa? ¡Ah, la pobre María estaba ya olvidada! ¿Sabían que, como otra consecuencia indirecta, ella, la hija del principal comerciante de Bursley, iba a ser arrojada de la casa en la que había nacido? En pie junto a la ventana, contemplando el triunfo de la Federación, se arrepintió amargamente de no haber comprado casa y tienda en la venta Mericarp, años antes. ¡Ya les habría enseñado ella como propietaria lo que es bueno...! Olvidaba que la propiedad que poseía en Bursley era para ella un permanente fastidio y que estaba siempre pensando venderla fueran las que fueran las pérdidas.

Se dijo que tenía voto y que si hubiera estado «en condiciones de salir» claro está que habría votado. Se dijo que habría sido su deber votar. Y entonces, por una ilusión de sus agitados nervios, cada vez más tensos conforme pasaba el día, empezó a imaginarse que su ciática remitía. Dijo: «¡Ojalá pudiera salir!». Podía tomar un coche, o alguno de los vehículos que iban de un lado a otro tendría la amabilidad de llevarla al ayuntamiento y quizá, como un favor, de traerla de regreso. ¡Pero no! No se atrevía a salir. Tenía miedo, verdadero miedo, a que hasta la dócil Mary se lo impidiera. Por lo demás, podía enviar a Mary por un coche. Pero ¡si Lily volvía y la sorprendía saliendo o entrando! No debía salir. Sin embargo, la ciática estaba extrañamente mejor. Era una estupidez pensar en salir. ¡No obstante...! Y Lily no venía. La ofendía que no hubiera venido a visitarla otra vez. Lily la estaba descuidando. Saldría. No había ni cuatro minutos hasta el ayuntamiento y estaba mejor. Y llevaba mucho rato sin caer ningún chubasco; el viento estaba secando el barro de las calzadas. Sí; iría.

Con el sigilo de un ladrón entró en su dormitorio y se vistió; y con el sigilo de un ladrón se deslizó escaleras abajo y, sin decir una palabra a Mary, salió a la calle. Era una aventura sin esperanza. En cuanto estuvo en la calle percibió toda su debilidad, toda la fatiga que el esfuerzo ya le había supuesto. Volvió el

dolor. Las calles todavía estaban mojadas y sucias, el viento era frío y el cielo tenía un aspecto amenazador. Debía regresar. Debía reconocer que había sido una estúpida por soñar semejante empresa. Le pareció que el ayuntamiento estaba a millas de distancia, en la cima de una montaña. Siguió adelante, sin embargo, firme en su decisión de contribuir a matar a la Federación. Cada paso le hacía rechinar sus viejos dientes. Eligió el camino que pasaba por Cock Yard porque si hubiera ido por la Plaza tendría que pasar por delante de la tienda de Holl y tal vez la vería Lily.

Éste fue el milagro del que los políticos fueron testigos sin saber que era un milagro. Para impresionarlos, Constanza tendría que haberse desmayado antes de votar y haberse convertido en el centro de una muchedumbre de observadores boquiabiertos. Pero sea como fuere consiguió volver a casa sobre sus propios y torturados pies y una Mary sorprendida y quejosa le abrió la puerta. Empezaba a llover. Entonces se asustó de las penalidades de su aventura y de las atroces consecuencias de ésta en su cuerpo. Un terrible agotamiento la dejó sin fuerzas. Pero había llevado a cabo la hazaña.

V

A la mañana siguiente, tras una noche que no hubiera podido describir, Constanza se encontró tendida en la cama, con los miembros extendidos. Notaba que tenía el rostro cubierto por la transpiración. El cordón de la campanilla colgaba a treinta centímetros de su cabeza, pero decidió que en vez de moverse para alcanzarlo prefería aguardar a que Mary acudiera *motu proprio*. Sus experiencias de aquella noche le habían hecho temer el menor movimiento; cualquier cosa era mejor que moverse. Se sentía vagamente enferma; sufría una especie de dolor amortiguado y tenía mucha sed y un poco de frío. Sabía que su brazo y su pierna izquierdos estaban extraordinariamente sensibles al tacto. Cuando por fin entró Mary, limpia, fresca y pálida en medio de toda su afabilidad, encontró a su ama del color de un huevo de pato, con la cara hinchada y una expresión extrañamente inquieta.

—Mary —dijo Constanza—, Me siento muy rara. Quizá sea mejor que vayas a avisar a la señorita Holl y le pidas que telefonee al doctor Stirling.

Éste fue el comienzo de la última enfermedad de Constanza. Mary comunicó a la señorita Holl que su ama había salido la tarde anterior a pesar de su ciática y Lily transmitió la información al médico. Después, Lily acudió a hacerse cargo de Constanza. Pero no se atrevió a reprender a la inválida.

—¿Se sabe ya el resultado? —murmuró Constanza.

—Oh, sí —dijo Lily en tono desenfadado—. Hay mayoría por más de mil doscientos votos contra la Federación. ¡Menuda excitación la de anoche! Ya le dije ayer por la mañana que la Federación iba a salir derrotada.

Lily hablaba como si el resultado fuera ya totalmente seguro; su tono indicaba a Constanza: «¡No se irá a imaginar que ayer por la mañana le dije algo que no es verdad sólo para animarla!». La verdad, sin embargo, era que hacia el final del día casi todo el mundo creía que la Federación iba a prevalecer. El resultado había causado una gran sorpresa. Los más profundos filósofos eran los únicos que no se habían sorprendido de ver que las simples fuerzas ciegas, sordas e inertes de la reacción, totalmente desprovistas de la ayuda de la lógica y junto con una organización defectuosa, habían sido al final mucho más poderosas que todo el entusiasmo alerta dispuesto contra ellas. Fue una notable lección para los reformistas.

—¡Oh! —musitó Constanza, sorprendida. Se sentía aliviada, pero le hubiera gustado que la mayoría fuera menor. Además, su interés por el asunto había disminuido. Eran sus miembros lo que la preocupaba ahora.

—Pareces cansada —dijo débilmente a Lily.

—¿De veras? —contestó Lily escuetamente, ocultando el hecho de que se había pasado la mitad de la noche atendiendo a Dick Povey, que, en un sensacional descenso sobre Maccleshfield, había sido arrastrado entre las copas de una hilera de álamos en detrimento de un codo; el aeronauta profesional se había roto la pierna.

Entonces llegó el doctor Stirling.

—Me temo que mi ciática ha empeorado, doctor —dijo Constanza, en tono contrito.

—¿Esperaba que mejorase? —replicó él, mirándola con severidad. Ella supo que alguien le había ahorrado el apuro de confesar la escapada.

Sin embargo, su ciática no había empeorado. Su ciática no se había portado vilmente. Lo que sufría eran los preliminares de un ataque de reumatismo agudo. ¡Desde luego, había elegido bien el mes y el tiempo adecuados para su escapada! Fatigada por el dolor, por la agitación nerviosa y por el inmenso esfuerzo físico y moral necesario para llegar al ayuntamiento y volver, había cogido un resfriado y se le habían mojado los pies. En una persona como ella, eso era suficiente. El médico utilizó sólo la expresión «reumatismo agudo». Constanza no sabía que el reumatismo agudo era exactamente lo mismo que aquella terrible enfermedad, la fiebre reumática, y no se le informó de ello. Durante un considerable espacio de tiempo no se imaginó que su estado era extremadamente grave. El médico indicó que llamara a dos enfermeras y explicó la frecuencia de sus propias visitas diciendo que su preocupación principal era reducir al mínimo los dolores, tanto como fuera posible, y que ello sólo se podía lograr con una constante vigilancia. El dolor era muy intenso. Pero Constanza estaba muy acostumbrada al dolor intenso. La ciática, cuando está en su máxima actividad, no es superada ni siquiera por la fiebre reumática. Constanza llevaba años padeciendo dolores casi constantes. Sus amigos, por mucha que fuera su solidaridad, no podían apreciar la intensidad de su tortura. Estaban tan acostumbrados a ella como la propia Constanza. Y la monotonía y meticulosidad de sus quejas (por poco comparables que fueran con su causa) embotaban necesariamente el filo de la compasión. «¡Otra vez la señora Povey y su ciática! ¡Pobrecilla, la verdad es que es un poco tediosa!». Tenían tendencia a no darse cuenta de que la ciática es todavía más tediosa que las quejas por la ciática.

Un día pidió que fuera a verla Dick. Éste fue con el brazo en cabestrillo y le dijo con renuencia que se había hecho daño en el codo al caérsele el bastón y resbalar bajando la escalera.

—Lily no me lo había dicho —dijo Constanza, recelosa.

—¡Oh, si no es nada! —repuso Dick. Ni siquiera la habitación de la enferma podía arrebatarle el gozo de su magnífica aventura aeronáutica.

—¡Espero que no vayas a correr riesgos! —dijo Constanza.

—¡No temas nada! —respondió él— Yo moriré en la cama.

¡Y estaba absolutamente convencido de que sería así y no como consecuencia de un accidente! La enfermera no le permitió estar más tiempo en la habitación.

Lily sugirió que tal vez Constanza quisiera que escribiera a Cyril, sólo para asegurarse de que tenían su dirección correcta. Se había ido a un viaje por Italia con algunos amigos de los que Constanza no sabía nada. Había mucha incertidumbre en cuanto a la dirección; tenían varias, todas ellas la lista de correos de diversas ciudades. Cyril había mandado postales a su madre. Dick y Lily fueron a la oficina de correos y telegrafiaron a varias regiones del extranjero.

Aunque Constanza estaba demasiado enferma para saber lo enferma que estaba, aunque no tenía idea de la confusión doméstica causada por su dolencia, su mente estaba a menudo notablemente clara y podía entregarse a largas y sensatas meditaciones por encima del inquieto mar del dolor. En las primeras horas de la noche, después del cambio de enfermera y de que Mary se hubiera ido a dormir, extenuada, y cuando Lily estaba dando a Dick el informe del día en la tienda, la enfermera estaba ya dormida y la de noche había hecho sus preparativos, entonces, en el silencio de la habitación, tenuemente iluminada, Constanza discutía consigo misma durante una hora cada noche. Pensaba en Sofía con frecuencia. A pesar de que Sofía había muerto, la seguía compadeciendo por ser una mujer cuya vida se había desperdiciado. Esta idea de la inútil y desperdiciada vida de Sofía y de la trascendental importancia de aferrarse a unos principios acudía a ella una y otra vez. «¿Por qué se escapó con él? ¡Ojalá no se hubiera escapado con él!», repetía. ¡Y, sin embargo, había algo tan espléndido en Sofía! ¡Eso hacía que su caso fuera todavía más lamentable! Constanza nunca se compadecía de sí misma. No consideraba que los Hados la hubieran tratado muy mal. No estaba muy descontenta de sí misma. El invencible sentido común de una naturaleza sana le impedía, en sus mejores momentos, deshacerse débilmente en autocompasión. Había vivido en la honradez y la amabilidad un buen número de años y había conocido horas de triunfo. Era justamente respetada, tenía una posición, poseía dignidad, gozaba de una situación próspera. Había en ella, después de todo, un cierto grado de sosegado engreimiento. No existía nadie que «le echara el pie delante». ¡Cierto, era vieja! Como miles de personas en Bursley. Sufría. Como miles de personas. ¿Con quién estaría dispuesta a intercambiar su destino? Tenía muchas insatisfacciones. Pero se elevaba por encima de ellas. Cuando repasaba su vida, y la vida en general, pensaba, con una especie de ánimo ácido pero no agrio: *«¡Bueno, así es la vida!»*. A pesar de su hábito de

lamentarse por nimiedades domésticas, era, por la esencia de su carácter, «una gran persona que sacaba el mayor provecho posible de las cosas». Así pues, no se lamentaba en exceso por su excursión al ayuntamiento para votar, cuyas secuelas habían resultado ser ridículamente inoportunas. «¿Cómo iba yo a saberlo?», se preguntaba.

El único asunto en el que tenía que hacerse graves reproches era el haber mimado a Cyril con tanta indulgencia tras la muerte de Samuel Povey. Pero el final de sus reproches era invariablemente: «¡Me imagino que volvería a hacer lo mismo! ¡Y probablemente no habría cambiado nada el que no lo hubiese mimado». Y hubiera pagado diez veces más por aquella debilidad. Quería a Cyril, pero no se hacía ilusiones en cuanto a él; veía sus dos lados. Recordaba todas las penas y las humillaciones que le había causado. Sin embargo, su afecto no se veía disminuido por ellas. Un hijo podía ser peor que Cyril; éste tenía cualidades admirables. No le guardaba rencor por estar lejos de Inglaterra cuando ella yacía enferma. «Si fuera grave —se dijo —vendría sin perder un momento». Y Lily y Dick eran un tesoro para ella. Con los dos había tenido verdadera suerte. Le producía gran placer considerar el esplendor del regalo con que el día de su boda, que se aproximaba, les manifestaría el aprecio que les tenía. La secreta actitud de ambos hacia ella era de benévola condescendencia, que se expresaba en el tono en que se decían el uno al otro «la vieja señora». Tal vez les hubiera sobresaltado saber que Constanza los menospreciaba cariñosamente a los dos. Sentía ilimitada admiración por sus corazones, pero pensaba que Dick era un poco excesivamente brusco y un poco excesivamente payaso para ser un auténtico caballero. Y aunque Lily era toda una dama, en opinión de Constanza le faltaba fibra, agallas, o independencia de espíritu. Además, a su juicio había demasiada diferencia de edad entre ellos. Era dudoso que, una vez dicho todo, Constanza tuviera tanto que aprender de la petulante sabiduría de aquellos jóvenes.

Después de un rato de confesión consigo misma, caía a veces en un período de delirio poco profundo. En él vagaba invariablemente de acá para allá, perdida, por el largo pasadizo subterráneo que conducía desde la antecocina, más allá de la carbonera y del sótano de las cenizas, hasta el patio trasero. Y tenía miedo de las vastas tinieblas de aquellas regiones, como lo había tenido en su infancia.

No fue el reumatismo agudo sino una pericarditis sobrevenida lo que la mató en pocos días. Murió durante la noche, sola con la enfermera. Por una curiosa casualidad, el pastor wesleyano, habiéndose enterado de que estaba gravemente enferma, la había visitado el día anterior. Ella no lo había llamado; aquella visita pastoral, la visita de un hombre que siempre había dicho que las muchas obligaciones del circuito hacían casi imposibles las visitas pastorales, la hizo pensar. Por la tarde había pedido que llevaran arriba a *Fossette*.

Así fue arrojada de su casa, pero no por Modas Midland. Los viejos se decían: «¿Se ha enterado usted de que se ha muerto la señora Povey? ¡Ay, Dios mío! Pronto no quedará nadie». Aquellos viejos eran malos profetas. Los amigos de Constanza la lloraron sinceramente y olvidaron lo tedioso de su ciática. En su aflicción trataron de representarse todo lo que le había tocado pasar en su vida. Posiblemente creyeron que aquel intento imaginativo les había salido bien. Nadie más que Constanza podía saber lo que a Constanza le había tocado pasar y lo que la vida había significado para ella.

Cyril no estuvo en el funeral. Llegó con tres días de retraso. (Como no tenía ningún interés en los asuntos amorosos de Dick y Lily, la pareja se quedó sin regalo de boda. El testamento, que databa de hacía quince años, era en favor de Cyril.) Pero sí asistió el inmortal Charles Critchlow, lleno de calmoso y sardónico regocijo y sin que nadie se lo pidiera. Aunque fabulosamente senil, había conservado e incluso aumentado su capacidad de gozar de una catástrofe. Ahora iba a los funerales con entusiasmo, absorbido con satisfacción por la tarea de enterrar a sus amigos uno por uno. Fue él quien dijo, con su voz estridente, temblona, chirriante y pausada: «¡Es una lástima que no haya vivido lo suficiente para ver que la Federación sale adelante después de todo! ¡La habría fastidiado mucho!» (pues los poco escrupulosos defensores de la Federación habían descubierto un método para anular los resultados del referéndum y la *Señal* estaba más repleta que nunca de Federación).

Cuando partió el breve cortejo fúnebre, Mary y la débil *Fossette* (única reliquia de la relación entre la familia Baines y París) se quedaron solas en la casa. La llorosa sirvienta preparó la cena de la perra y se la puso delante en el plato sopero de costumbre y en el rincón de costumbre. *Fossette* la olisqueó y luego se alejó y se tumbó, con un suspiro perruno, ante el fuego de la cocina. Habían trastornado sus hábitos aquel día: era consciente del descuido, debido a acontecimientos que estaban fuera de su comprensión. Y no le gustaba. Se sentía ofendida; su apetito se sentía ofendido. Sin embargo, al cabo de unos minutos empezó a reconsiderar el asunto. Echó una mirada al plato sopero y, por si daba la casualidad de que después de todo contuviera algo digno de inspección, se equilibró torpemente sobre sus viejas patas y acudió de nuevo a él.

[*] Nota de la digitalización: El texto corresponde a la edición de la editorial Gredos cuyos datos figuran en esta página. La portada incluida corresponde, por razones estéticas, a la edición RBA.

[2] Parece casi ocioso citar al respecto el clásico ensayo de Walter Benjamin, «The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction», en Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* vol. 1, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999.

[3] Evidentemente, se trata de un juego de palabras, a partir del vocablo inglés *romance,* entre patrimonio y matrimonio. Ya me he ocupado anteriormente de esa cuestión en la introducción a la edición de *La Sra. Dolloway,* de Virginia Woolf (Madrid, Cátedra, 1993, págs. 144-45). El término inglés *romance* no se ajusta exactamente a su traducción española. No lo utilizamos aquí en el sentido del romance medieval, sino tal y como ha sido acuñado por la tradición literaria en Gran Bretaña. Casi desde sus comienzos el *romance* surge dentro de la narrativa en oposición a la novela, y describe una obra narrativa, centrada fundamentalmente en el tema amoroso, en la que se suspende toda regla de verosimilitud y donde se deja la puerta abierta para la intromisión de lo maravilloso e incluso lo inverosímil. Nathaniel Hawthorne da en *La Letra Escarlata* (1850) una clásica definición del romance en oposición a la novela.

[4] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Londres, 1948), Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1962.

[5] *Earnestness* es un término típicamente Victoriano y de difícil traducción, que ya parodiara Oscar Wilde en *The Importance of being Eamest.* Engloba los conceptos de seriedad, una cierta sinceridad y una aplicación y ardor en el trabajo o en la empresa en la que se esté empeñado en él momento.

[6] Es difícil valorar desde fuera la influencia seminal que el Metodismo y otras variantes de protestantismo popular tuvieron en la definición de una identidad popular, provinciana, fundamentalmente norteña, de clase media y media baja, vertebradora de la sociedad británica. Habría que remontarse hasta la Revolución en el siglo XVII. Ver al respecto toda la obra de Raymond Williams, especialmente *Culture and Society,* 1780-1950, New York, Columbia U. P., 1958.

[7] Ver en la traducción, págs. 51-52.

[8] Las «Potteries», en referencia a su actividad principal, la alfarería, es el nombre con el que desde el XIX se viene conociendo a las seis ciudades en torno al Trent donde se instaló la industria manufacturera de la loza y la cerámica. Aunque podríamos traducirlo como las «Ciudades Alfareras», el término ha .adquirido ya la vigencia de un nombre propio y como tal lo utilizamos.

[9] Citado por John Wain en su Introducción a la edición de *The Old Wives' Tale,* en Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1986, pág. 13.

[10] Me refiero al movimiento denominado como los «Angry Young Men», que surgió en la década de los cincuenta, con manifestaciones dramáticas, narrativas y cinematográficas. Se trataba de jóvenes de clase media-baja en su mayoría que irrumpieron en el panorama tradicionalmente elitista de la intelectualidad británica con temas populares y críticos con la férrea estructura de clases de la sociedad británica y la profunda insatisfacción social que acompaña al desmembramiento del Imperio. Vid R. Rabinowitz, *The reaction against experiment in the English novel, 1950-60,* Nueva York, 1967, y J. Russell Taylor, *Anger and After,* Londres, 1962.

[11] M. Drabble, *Arnold Bennett, a biography,* Londres, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1974.

[12] Véanse los diarios donde afirma que su reconocimiento y su fama así como el grueso de su obra corresponden al momento prebélico: *Journals of Arnold Bennett,* ed. Norman Flower, vol. 1, Londres, Casell, 1932-33, pag. 369.

[13] J. Hepburn, *The Letters of Arnold Bennett,* Introducción, vol. 1, Londres, Oxford University Press, 1966, pag. 20.

[14] Ver André Gide, Correspondance avec Arnold Bennett. Vingt ans d'amitié littéraire (1911-1931), París, French & European Publishers, 1964.

[15] Ver, más adelante, el Prefacio de Arnold Bennett.

[16] Ver *The Old Wives' Tale*, ed. John Wain, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1986, pág. 34.

[17] Véase Fussell, *The Great War and Modem Memory,* Londres, Oxford University Press, 1975.

[18] Mujer joven y emancipada de los años veinte, cuya exponente principal fue Daisy Buchanan en *El gran Gatsby,* de F. S. Fitzgerald.

[19] Fraser, *The Modem Writer and His World,* Harmondsworth, Penguin Books (1953), 1970, pag. 82.

[20] Citado por Fraser, *ibídem,* pag. 82. Pound está hablando muy propia y específicamente de Galsworthy y su obra *The Man of Property,* pero el comentario lo hace extensivo a su generación de edwardianos.

[21] Véase V. Woolf, «Modern Novels», en *The Essays of Virginia Woolf,* vol. 3, ed. Andrew McNeillie, Londres, The Hogarth Press, 1988, págs. 30-37. Esta es la primera formulación del tema que posteriormente reelaborará en su ensayo ya clásico «Modern Fiction», que incluyó en el volumen *The Common Reader* I.

[22] Véase *The Essays of Virginia Woolf,* op. cit., pags. 32 y 33.

[23] También en este punto Virginia Woolf utilizó la obra de Arnold Bennett como pantalla contra la que esbozar su teoría de la caracterización narrativa de los personajes, en un primer artículo en el que decididamente habla con Bennett desde su título, «Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown», que luego reelaboró para una conferencia en Cambridge y en forma escrita en «Character in Fiction», publicado en el *Criterion,* julio 1924. Véase *The Critical Essays of Virginia Woolf,* vol. 3, págs. 420-37.

[24] Antiguo nombre inglés de la calzada romana que va desde el NO de Londres hasta Wroxeter; una de las principales de la Britania romana y posromana.

[25] Respecto, a las Cinco Ciudades, ver Introducción, pág. 15.

[26] En inglés, *showroom,* sala utilizada para la exhibición de géneros y mercancías en las tiendas que, por lo general, se encontraba situada justo encima de la primera planta.

[27] Los elementos que incluyen Pato *(Duck)* son Cisne *(Swan)* en el pueblo real.

[28] Casi ciento cuarenta kilos.

[29] Modificación del caleidoscopio inventada a mediados del siglo XIX.

* Cada uno de los instrumentos musicales de la familia del oboe. [nota de la digitalización]

[31] Un chelín *y* once peniques.

[32] En inglés puede llevarlo en la primera o en la segunda.

[33] En la época victoriana, *bitch* (perra) era una de las muchas palabras indecorosas.

[34] Miembros del movimiento obrero basado en la *Carta del Pueblo,* de gran influencia en los comienzos de la era victoriana.

[35] Fuera de serie.

[36] Moneda de plata de dos chelines, acuñada en 1849.

[37] Cantidad equivalente a una libra y cinco peniques. La guinea se dejó de acuñar en 1813.

[38] Botones.

[39] ¡Más ingleses!

[40] En Francia se denominaba *lorettes* a las cortesanas en la época en que el cuartel general de sus actividades se hallaba en el barrio próximo a la iglesia de Notre-Dame de Lorette, en París.

[41] Se aplicaba el nombre de *grisette* a las muchachas obreras, especialmente de París, por extensión del referido a una mujer vestida con la tela así llamada.

[42] ¿No hablaba usted de Rivain, señora?

[43] ¡Entonces, de acuerdo, querido amigo!

[44] Yo lo arreglaré.

[45] Propina.

[46] Notable.

[47] ¡Ahí está! / ¡Nicolás! / ¡Ah, ah, ah!.

[48] Indispuesto.

[49] Peinador.

[50] Aseo, tocador.

[51] ¡Ya estoy harto! ¡Déjame, te lo ruego!

[52] Cura.

[53] De Napoleón.

[54] Fiesta.

[55] Mona.

[56] Mueca.

[57] ¡Sería el colmo!

[58] Víctor Cherbuliez (1829-1899), novelista suizo nacionalizado francés.

[59] Véase pág. 536.

[60] *United Presbiterian,* «Iglesia Presbiteriana Unida».

[61] Hanley, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent, Longton y Tunstall.

[62] «Los viejos tiempos», literalmente «hace mucho tiempo». Célebre canción tradicional escocesa a la que se adaptó un poema de Robert Burns (1789).